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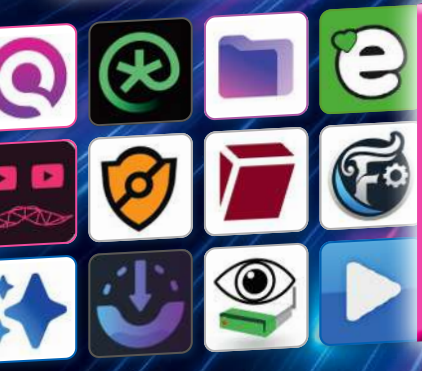

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WHAT'S BEING AXED IN 2026 (so get ready!)

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From the Editor

Nothing ruins software like success. I remember when CCleaner was the world's best junk remover and would be the first name we'd add to any feature on essential programs. Millions of users around the world agreed, which was why in 2017 security giant Avast bought it. Within months it had become bloated with adverts, pointless tools and pre-ticked boxes that installed all manner of dross.

CCleaner does make an appearance in Robert Irvine's Cover Feature, but only as one of the programs you *mustn't* use. His new favourite junk remover is Sparkle, which has one of the friendliest designs I've ever seen.

Simpler interfaces like Sparkle's has been one of the key trends of 2025, and Robert's other picks suggest it'll continue next year. Helium is another great example – a back-to-basics browser without any AI clutter. I also love Screenbox and now use it more than VLC, while Atomic Mail's unlimited free storage has lured me from Proton Mail. I predict they'll all make regular appearances in *Computeractive* throughout 2026.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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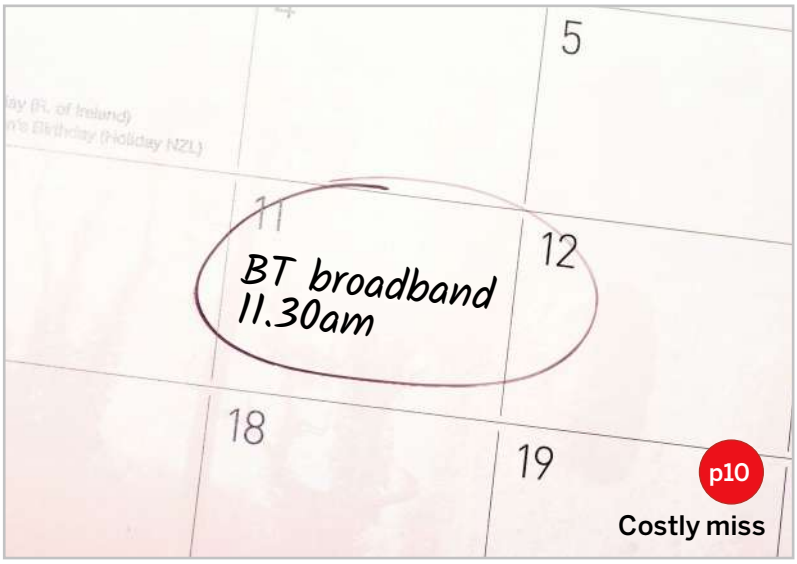

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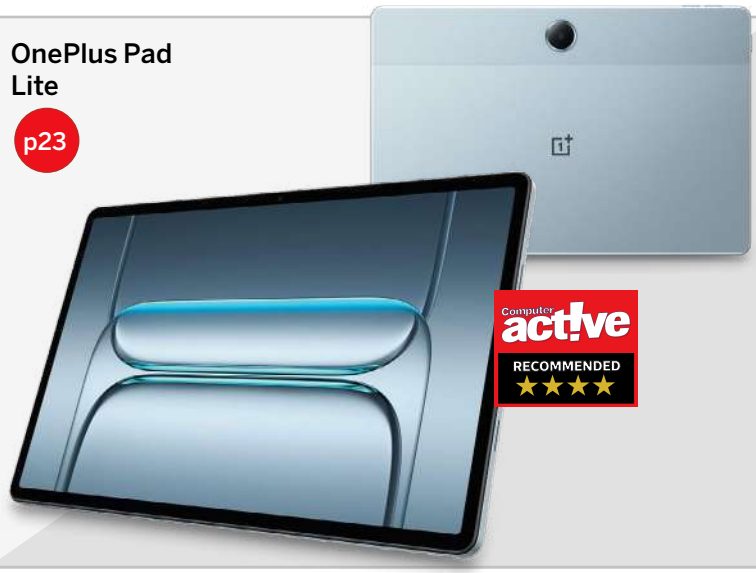

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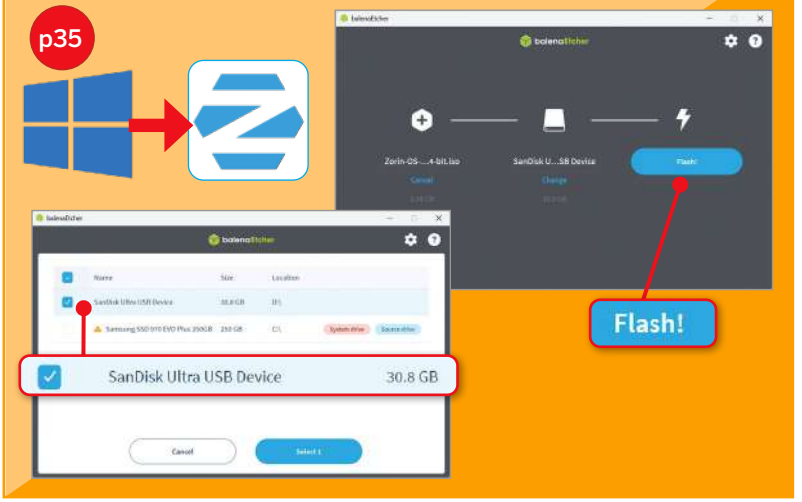

Tech your pick

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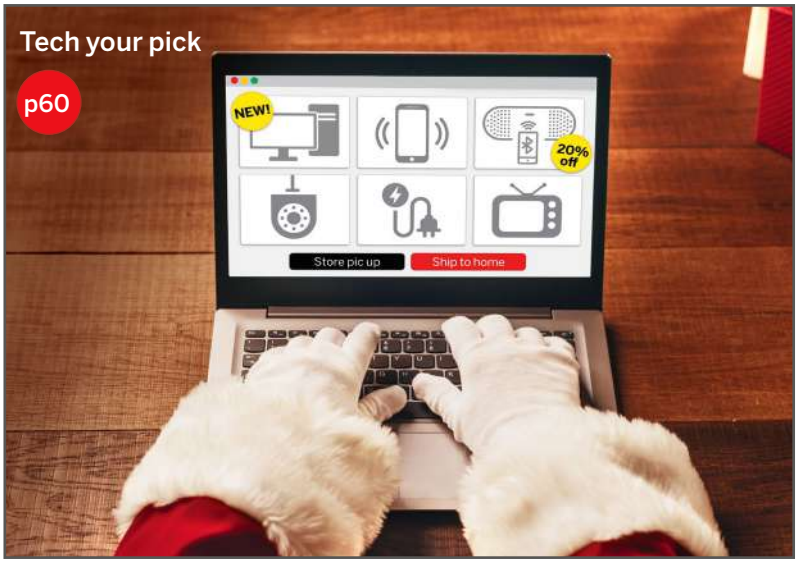


Emergency fix lets W10 users enrol in extended updates

Microsoft has released an emergency update to fix a bug that was preventing Windows 10 users from enrolling in its Extended Security Update (ESU) scheme.

The fix was part of the update KB5071959, released on 11 November. Microsoft said it solves a problem "where the enrollment wizard may fail during enrollment".

It was an 'out-of-band' (OOB) update, which is Microsoft's description of updates that aren't part of its monthly schedule.

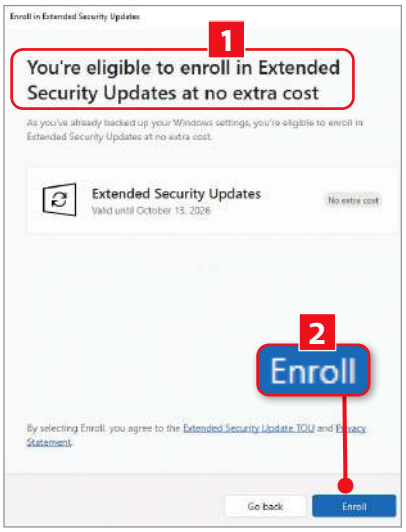
To check whether the update has been installed on your computer, first press Windows key+I to open Settings. Now click 'Update & Security' followed by Windows Update, then 'Update history' on the right.

If it's not there, click the 'Check for updates' button then install any updates that appear.

Windows Update
1
Your version of Windows has reached the end of support
Your device is no longer receiving security updates. Learn about the end of support
Check for updates
2

Microsoft released the emergency fix on the same day it issued the first scheduled extended update for Windows 10 (KB5068781).

This update fixed a problem that showed the message 'Your version of Windows has reached the end of support' on the Windows Update page (1 in our screenshot left) even if the user had successfully enrolled for ESUs. Clicking the 'Check for updates' button 2 had no effect.



You're eligible for free extended updates if you're running Windows 10 version 22H2 and you're backing up and syncing OneDrive.

To do so, open Windows Update and look for the message 'You're eligible to enroll in Extended Security Updates at no extra cost' (1 in our screenshot left). If it's there click Enroll below 2.

WHAT WE THINK

This is a terrible start to Microsoft's year of extended updates. The company didn't say how many users have been unable to enrol, but every one has been put at unnecessary risk of attack.

Many of these frustrated users have emailed us looking for help, so we urge them to try enrolling again. If it still fails, it's worth trying an alternative to Windows, such as the Linux distro Zorin OS – see page 35.

Giffgaff offers eSIMs to customers though its website

Giffgaff now lets you sign up to eSIMs through its website (www.giffgaff.com). It first offered eSIMs in 2023, but until now you've only been able to manage them through its app.

Giffgaff's latest announcement, made on its community forum (www.snipca.com/57193), suggests eSIMs are available to both new and existing customers through its website.

It said that when you select your SIM-only mobile plan, you'll be asked if you want a physical SIM card or an eSIM.

If you're an existing customer you'll need to log into the Giffgaff app then tap Account, SIM, 'Replace my SIM' then 'Switch to a new eSIM'.

New customers have to create an account then activate their eSIM from the app dashboard.

Giffgaff is one of the UK's biggest MVNOs, with around four million customers. It piggybacks on O2's network, along with Sky Mobile and Tesco Mobile.

You'll like this...
Google is making solar-powered remote controls (www.snipca.com/57172)

but not this...
O2 charged a customer £1,000 for losing his phone number (www.snipca.com/57191)

TalkTalk increases mid-contract price rises to £4 from next April

TalkTalk will increase its mid-contract price rises to £4 a month from next April, up from the existing £3.

It follows both BT and Virgin increasing their mid-contract hikes by the same amount.

The move affects new customers who join after 16 November 2025 and existing customers who renew after this date.

This means customers don't have the right to cancel because the £4 rise is written into their contracts.

TalkTalk blamed high inflation in "recent years", saying that "not only have investment costs increased, but the regulated wholesale prices we pay our suppliers have gone up too" (www.snipca.com/57169).

It added: "This is why we need to increase our prices, to enable us to invest further in the service that we offer to you today and in the future."

The rise is another example of Ofcom's rules forcing telecoms companies to announce rises in "pounds and pence" backfiring.

The regulator introduced rules in late 2024 to prevent providers linking increases to the rate of inflation.

Companies now have to be more transparent about increases, but this has led to much higher increases proportionally than before.

These flat increases mean the cheaper the deal, the bigger the increase in percentage terms.

For example, the increase from £3 to £4 is 33 per cent – substantially higher than any increase when companies linked them to inflation.

In November, O2 announced an even higher increase of 39 per cent in mobile contracts in April 2026, from £1.80 a month to £2.50.

Unlike TalkTalk's increase, O2's rise affects existing customers. This means they can cancel without paying an early-termination fee within 30 days of O2 contacting them.

First Freely box arrives in time for Xmas – priced £99

Netgem has released the first Freely streaming device, priced £99.

The Pleio (pronounced 'play-oh') lets you watch more than 55 live channels, including those from BBC, ITV, Channels 4 and 5, through the internet – like Freeview but without needing an aerial.

It means you can now watch Freely without having to buy a new smart TV with the service built in.

The Pleio also has Android TV's app library including Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV, Disney+ and Netflix.

The device itself is a small black puck (1 in photo), that responds to a remote control 2.

It comes with a controller 3 for playing games through Netgem's Cloud Gaming service. This costs £9.99 a month after a three-month trial.

The subscription also includes more than 150 extra FAST channels, showing music, films, international news and more.

Local broadband providers such as Brsk, Connect Fibre and WightFibre are offering the Pleio in their packages. It's also available on Amazon (www.snipca.com/57177).

Well review the Pleio in our next issue – out Weds 17 December. Read more on Netgem's site: www.snipca.com/57176.

IN BRIEF

TALK TO 20 PEOPLE IN CHATGPT

ChatGPT is introducing group chats for up to 20 people. It's rolling out the feature globally following a short trial. OpenAI, which makes ChatGPT, said it taught the chatbot "new social behaviours" for group chats so it knows "when to respond and when to stay quiet" (www.snipca.com/57175). We'll explain how to use it soon.

HACKERS STOLE USER DATA FROM LOGITECH

Logitech has admitted that hackers stole data that "likely included limited information about employees and consumers". It comes after the Russian hacking group CL0P claimed to have hacked the company. Logitech didn't confirm who the attackers were, but said it "doesn't believe" sensitive info like credit-card numbers were stolen. Read its statement at www.snipca.com/57173.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

This was the heart-warming moment Russia's first humanoid AI robot, called Aldol, collapsed on stage just seconds after making its debut. Its embarrassed creators quickly covered it with a cloth, which then got tangled (watch at www.snipca.com/57163). Hilarious, though let's hope Putin wasn't amused.

IN BRIEF

NORDVPN BLOCKS SCAM CALLS IN THE UK

NordVPN has launched its Call Protection feature in the UK, available in the £2.89-a-month Plus plan (www.snipca.com/57126). It shows warnings about potential scam calls (see screenshot left), letting you ignore, decline or send to voicemail. NordVPN won Gold in Issue 717's group test of paid-for VPNs – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/57124.

PLAY BOGGLE & PICTIONARY ON NETFLIX

Netflix will soon let you play Pictionary, Tetris and Boggle (pictured below) on your TV. It's adding the games over Christmas, along with two others – Lego Party and Party Crashers: Fool Your Friends. For details visit www.snipca.com/57128.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

This bride is wearing augmented-reality glasses that let her 'see' her groom – an AI persona called Klaus she created on ChatGPT. The ceremony was hosted by a Japanese firm that organises weddings for people who want to marry non-humans. Apparently, Klaus proposed a month after they started chatting. Watch the happy couple at www.snipca.com/57123.

Brits use 18% more phone data in 2025 (and hang up landlines)

Brits used nearly a fifth more mobile data in 2025 than the previous year, rising from just over 1 billion gigabytes every month to 1.2 billion.

The figure comes from Ofcom's annual Connected Nations report (www.snipca.com/57132), which analyses the UK's broadband and mobile infrastructure and how the public uses the services available.

Ofcom said 1.2bn GB is the equivalent of streaming 400 million football matches in HD, watching 315 billion videos on TikTok or sending 1.3 quadrillion text-only WhatsApp messages.

It added that while 4G still accounts for most mobile traffic, 5G data grew by 53 per cent.

The report also found standalone 5G – which doesn't rely on 4G as a backup – now covers 83 per cent of the UK outside of homes. Ofcom said EE has the widest coverage – up to 49 per cent.

Gigabit (1Gbps) broadband coverage increased too, rising from 84 to 87 per cent (26.4 million homes). However, only 56 per cent of households with access to gigabit broadband actually take it up.

Ofcom said as a result millions are missing out on "a broadband upgrade that could mean buffer-free streaming, seamless gaming, and saying goodbye to awkward freezes during video calls".

Northern Ireland continues to have the fastest average broadband speed of all four nations (see box above).

In addition, more than a million households gave up their landlines in 2025, ahead of copper phone lines being switched off in January 2027. However, more than 17 million landlines remain in the UK.

BROADBAND SPEEDS ACROSS THE UK

- **Northern Ireland** 325Mbps
- **England** 288Mbps
- **Scotland** 273Mbps
- **Wales** 243Mbps

Phone prices 'to soar' in 2026 – and AI is to blame

Prices of phones are set to soar in 2026 thanks to the rising cost of memory processors, Xiaomi warned.

Lu Weibing, president of the Chinese phone manufacturer, told investors that surging demand for chips is being driven by AI companies building data centres.

He said this would inevitably lead to a "sizeable rise in product retail prices".

The most recent Xiaomi phone we tested was the 15T Pro (Issue 721, page 26, pictured), which costs £625 (www.snipca.com/57135).

Weibing didn't indicate how much prices might rise by next year, but industry analysts expect the cost of memory chips to increase by at least 20 per cent.

Phone manufacturers are likely to pass much of this cost on to consumers with higher prices, though Weibing said this won't be enough to offset all costs. This suggests Xiaomi – and probably other manufacturers – will have to cut back on features in the phones it releases next year.

Samsung Galaxy phones may buck the trend, however, because reports from South Korea say it has negotiated a lower price for processors it uses in its devices.

• **Beat 2026's price rises – Issue 725, out Wednesday 17 December**

Couple slash heating bills by running data centre in their shed

An Essex couple have cut their monthly heating bills from £375 to £40-£60 after becoming the UK's first household to warm their home using a data centre located in their garden shed.

Terrence and Lesley Bridges, who live in a two-bed bungalow near Braintree, replaced their gas boiler with a new HeatHub system that captures warmth generated by more than 500 Raspberry Pi mini computers.

As they process data they also generate lots of heat. This is then captured by oil and transferred into their hot-water system.

The HeatHub was built by Welsh firm Thermify and is part of UK Power Networks' Shield scheme (www.snipca.com/57113), which develops ways to help "low-income residents" switch to more environmentally friendly forms of energy.

Credit Ben Schofield/BBC

Mr Bridges (pictured), 76, said warming their home is vital because his 75-year-old wife suffers from spinal stenosis, which causes severe pain in cold temperatures.

He said: "You can't fault the heating system, it is a one hundred per cent improvement on what we had before."

The couple also received solar panels through the Shield scheme.

Thermify's co-founder Travis Theune said the Bridges' HeatHub will eventually become part of a "remote and distributed" data centre made up of multiple units.

Long term, tech companies will pay Thermify to process their data using the HeatHubs. It's capable of running programs and analysing data, but can't cope with the demands of artificial intelligence.

He added the system provides "clean, green heat at a low-to-no price point" because "the electricity that's generating that heat is paid for by somebody else".

How do you keep your heating bills low? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Watch Virgin's FAST TV on-demand for first time

Virgin Media TV customers can now watch shows on demand on 11 channels that broadcast live.

These channels are known as FAST (Free Ad-Supported Streaming Television) and work like traditional TV, with scheduled programmes and advert breaks.

It's similar to Freeview, but delivered to the home through broadband cables, not beamed to an aerial.

The launch brings Virgin more in line with existing FAST services like Plex, Pluto, Rakuten TV, Roku Live and Tubi.

Virgin has picked its "most popular" FAST channels, which include History Hit, Homes Under the Hammer and Real Crime (see box left for all of them).

The feature is available to Virgin TV customers with V6, Virgin TV 360 and Stream boxes at no extra cost. Viewers can access it through Virgin's On Demand streaming app or by searching on their TV.

All advert breaks remain in programmes when you watch on demand. Visit Virgin Media's site for full details: www.snipca.com/57111.

In total, Virgin has 36 FAST channels, with the most recent addition being Inside Outside for shows on food, homes and gardens.

See Virgin's full channel list at www.snipca.com/57112.

Virgin's on-demand FAST TV channels

- Next Up Live Comedy
- Love Pets
- Haunt TV
- Homes Under the Hammer (pictured)
- Baywatch
- Real Crime
- Real Wild
- History Hit
- Wonder
- The Chat Show Channel
- TRACE Sport Stars

IN BRIEF

KINGSTON LAUNCHES FIRST CABLE-FREE SSD

Kingston has released its first SSD without a cable. The Dual Portable SSD (pictured below) has both USB-A and USB-C connectors with USB 3.2 Gen 2 read speeds of 1,050Mbps. It's available in 512GB (£112), 1TB (£149) and 2TB (£251) capacities – see www.snipca.com/57110.

SMARTY COMBINES EIGHT PLANS IN ONE

Smarty has launched its 'Everyone Unlimited' package that lets you combine up to eight individual plans into a single one with unlimited data. The 'Group Owner' pays £20 a month, while additional members pay £15. Smarty is an MVNO that uses Three's UK network. For details visit www.snipca.com/57107.

NETGEAR TO RELEASE £530 PORTABLE ROUTER

Netgear has announced its Nighthawk 5G M7 portable router (pictured right), which is a cheaper version of the Pro edition. Priced £530, the M7 provides Wi-Fi 7 speeds up to 3.6Gbps, connecting up to 32 devices. It also lets you buy an eSIM within its app. Battery life is 10 hours – read more at www.snipca.com/57108.

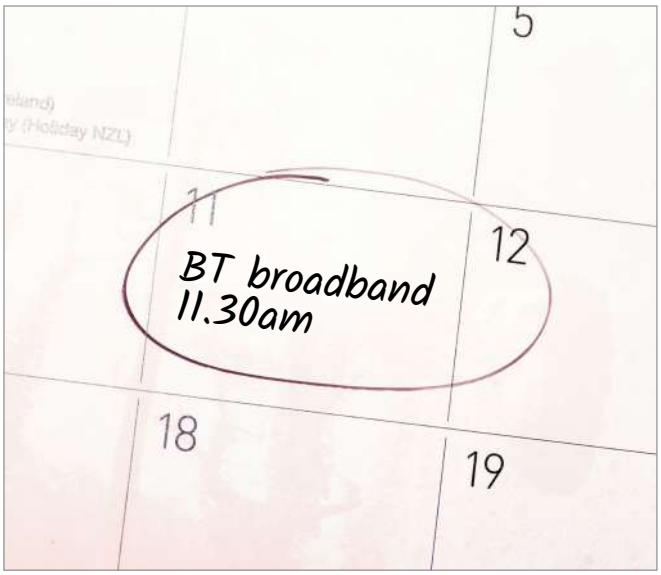
Will BT start charging £50 for missed appointments?

It might be getting tough with absent-minded customers

You may know that under Ofcom's rules (www.snipca.com/57199), broadband providers have to pay you £31.19 compensation if an engineer fails to turn up at your home, or cancels with less than 24 hours' notice. But what you might not realise is that they can also charge *you* if you're not home when they call. Missed appointments work both ways.

This came to the public's attention in November when the website ISPreview got hold of a leaked internal email from BT. It said that in future customers could face a charge of £50 if they're not in when an engineer calls.

The email claims that customers miss around 10 per cent of appointments despite being reminded several times about them.



THE FACTS

- A leaked email suggests BT is considering charging customers £50 if they're not in when a broadband engineer calls
- BT says it already charges customers on a case-by-case basis for missed appointments, but there's no mention of this in its terms and conditions
- Sky and Virgin both charge £25 for missed appointments while TalkTalk charges £75

> "Customers miss around 10 per cent of appointments despite being reminded several times"

However, the charge appears to be more of a threat than reality – for now at least. The email continues: "The 'possible' charge is being advised to encourage customers to re-book appointments if they cannot meet it. At this point we won't be adding the charge while we work through the finer details and impact of the charges, but we do reserve the right to charge and may do so in the future."

So far, so confusing. Will you get charged or not? Well, BT has since confirmed that the £50 fee isn't new and that it's always had a policy of fining customers for missed appointments – albeit on a case-by-case basis.

Fine, but BT doesn't mention that in its terms and conditions. Visit www.snipca.com/57201 and scroll down to section 7 ('Setting up the service') and it says you must give it notice of "two working days" if you need to cancel. But there's no mention of a charge.

The closest BT gets is saying that it will "charge you the installation charge if you prevent the installation from being done". But that makes it sound like you'll be fined only if you physically prevent the engineer from carrying out their work, not if you simply fall asleep and don't answer the door when they call.

Other providers are much clearer. Virgin Media, for example, says "if you miss your appointment or no one aged 18+ is in when our engineer arrives, a £25 fee may be charged to your account" (visit www.snipca.com/57202 and click 'What happens if I miss my appointment?').

Sky charges the same amount (www.snipca.com/57205), but TalkTalk is more severe: "If you amend your booking after 12 noon the day before your visit (or Saturday for a Monday booking) you will be subject to a missed appointment charge of £75" (visit www.snipca.com/57204 and click 'Cancelling or rescheduling your appointment').

All these fines are legal, but you might reasonably ask BT and TalkTalk why they charge customers £50 and £75 when under Ofcom's rules they only have to pay £31.19 themselves for missed appointments.

The more interesting question though is why someone at BT chose to leak this email. Was it from a concerned employee who thinks the fee is too much and wants BT to reduce or drop it? Or from a PR department wanting to soften up the public for a tougher policy on missed appointments?

If the latter, then it may backfire badly. Many customers will have experience of rescheduling their day, only to wait hours at home for a knock on the door that never comes. They'll be appalled that the fine they face for missing an appointment is more than what the company itself has to pay.

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Fake Captchas that install malware

What's the threat?

Cybercriminals are posting fake Captchas that trick you into installing malware on your computer. Rather than asking you to tick a box or identify parts of a photo, the Captchas say you need to paste a command or file into command-line tools in Linux, macOS or Windows.

Earlier forms of this scam, spotted in May and called ClickFix, gave written instructions only. But a more recent version, seen by UK firm Push Security, adds a video tutorial (1 in our screenshot) explaining what you need to do. If you follow the instructions you install the malware Lumma Stealer, which steals sensitive data like passwords and cookies.

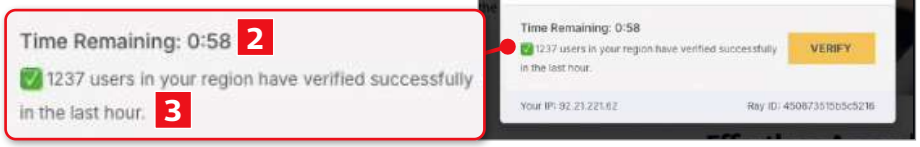
The scam has a countdown timer to add urgency 2 and claims that a certain number of people "in your region have verified successfully in the last hour" 3. It also uses a similar logo to Cloudflare 4, a reputable company whose security services include legitimate Captchas.

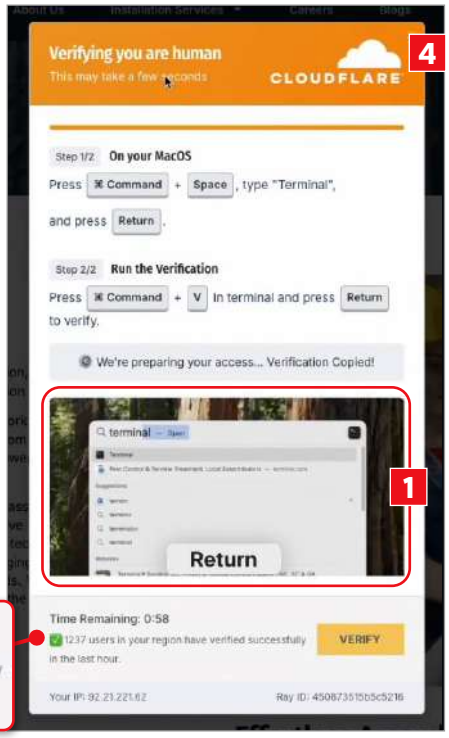
Push Security says the Captchas are spreading through malicious URLs that appear in Google search results, as well as by email, on social media and in adverts that appear in apps.

How can you stay safe?

Genuine Captchas will never ask you to run a file or perform a task on your computer, so ignore any that do. Also ignore any that show a countdown timer to pressure you to act. This is a classic tactic of scammers. If you accidentally copy a command in a fake Captcha, don't paste it anywhere. Instead overwrite it by copying something harmless.

Cloudflare explains how Captchas work and shows legitimate examples at www.snipca.com/56996.



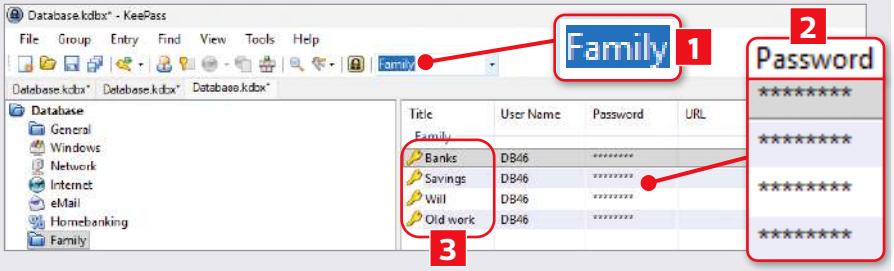

Verifying you are human
CLOUDFLARE 4
Step 1/2 On your MacOS
Press ⌘ Command + Space, type "Terminal", and press Return.
Step 2/2 Run the Verification
Press ⌘ Command + V in terminal and press Return to verify.
We're preparing your access... Verification Copied!
terminal
Return 1
Time Remaining: 0:58
1237 users in your region have verified successfully in the last hour.
VERIFY

New tools | Search by folder in KeePass 2.60

KeePass remains popular with users who want to store their passwords locally (ie, on their computer) rather than on a company's server. The latest version (2.60), released in early November, lets you search by the folder (group) your password is stored in, not just its title or username.

This is turned on by default, but check by clicking Tools, Options, then selecting the 'Interface (1)' tab and scrolling down to the 'Quick Search (Toolbar)' heading. Make sure 'Search for group paths in quick searches' is ticked.

In our example, we've searched for 'Family' (1 in our screenshot), which is one of our folders listed on the left. The result shows all the passwords 2 stored in the Family folder. Previously we'd have had to search for the specific entries themselves – for example, 'Banks', 'Savings', 'Will' and 'Old work' 3. Read what else is new and download it at www.snipca.com/56966.



ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

Fake Lidl ads on Facebook

Reading my local website Deeside.com I saw a warning that 49 fake Lidl adverts had been spotted on Facebook by researchers at Which?. The advert it showed was for an inflatable outdoor spa, down from £280 to £79. It rarely gets warm enough in Deeside for an outdoor spa, so I wasn't tempted to click the ad. It looked convincing though, with the correct Lidl logo (as you'll see at www.snipca.com/56967). Other products advertised include a folding scooter, a drone and climbing exercise machine, so look out for them.

John Sutton

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

O2 knows it can get away with 39% price rise

I agree with your comment that competition between phone networks is more effective than regulation at keeping prices affordable (Issue 723, page 6), but we don't really have competition in the UK. That's why O2 is confident it can increase mid-contract price rises by 39 per cent without losing many customers.

You often recommend switching to a MVNO, and I agree they have better customer service. But many of them are owned by the big four mobile networks (EE, O2, Three, Vodafone), which thwarts effective competition. For example, O2 owns Giffgaff, Three owns Smarty and Vodafone owns VOXI.

You can choose an independent MVNO such as Lycamobile (which I use), but like all MVNOs they piggyback on one of the big networks. So while they can compete on price, they can't compete on speed or coverage. And if networks all agree to raise their prices, this affects what the MVNOs have to charge customers.

MVNOs are still better than the big four, but let's not kid ourselves it's real competition. What we really need are more main networks to turn the big four into at least six, but that won't happen because they've cornered the market. So, in short, we're stuffed!

Julian Gough

Scrap Ofcom!

Ofcom needs to be scrapped and a new regulator set up that understands how regulation can backfire. Instead of forcing companies to raise prices in "pounds and pence", it should have stipulated that they can put up their prices by a certain amount a month, up to a maximum of four per cent of the existing contract price. That would keep price rises lower for customers on the cheapest contracts and avoid the absurdity of O2's flat rise of 39 per cent.

Graham Thompson

We won't learn AI lessons till it's too late

I agree with Leslie Ardern that there are dangers associated with AI (Letters, Issue 723), but I think he's asking too much of *Computeractive* to prevent the technology from taking over. That responsibility lies with politicians, lawmakers and the AI bosses themselves.

But regulation will only happen in response to a major incident – just like we only saw tougher rules for train and aeroplane safety after disasters. What scares me is that we don't even know the kind of disaster AI could trigger. I just hope whatever it is won't be too catastrophic to recover from.

Michael Lewis

Why can't I speak to a human at Evri?

Couriers seem to get a lot of stick from readers for dumping parcels all over the place. The problem is probably a lack of pride in the job and not being worried about being sacked as there are lots of other couriers they can join.

Another problem I'd like to highlight is how difficult it is to speak to a human at these companies. In particular, I've found it impossible to talk to an actual living, breathing person at Evri. Sometimes you can trick automated live chats by typing 'speak to a human' repeatedly, but that doesn't work with Evri. If you phone, you're met with an automated message that would test the patience of the most serene saint. I've also tried emailing, but got no response. I'm thinking of visiting one of its distribution depots, but I half expect it to be staffed by robots.

If any reader has managed to defeat Evri's defences, I'd be eternally grateful.

Richard Bond

EE messed up my eSIMs

I read with interest Issue 722's Cover Feature on eSIMs (pictured below) and would like to add my own experience. I swapped from a TalkTalk SIM card to an EE eSIM on my iPhone. I also have a SIM card in an EE tablet for work purposes. After EE activated the eSIM on my iPhone, the account for my tablet was closed. It meant I couldn't use either service.

It took EE a week to sort out the problem, and even then I either couldn't make calls or couldn't connect to the internet. Eventually EE admitted it had put the eSim on the same account as the tablet, and because both were active they were supposedly

Computer active
DITCH CHROME FOR COMET
BIN YOUR SIM CARD
Why you must switch to an eSIM – CHEAPER, EASIER, SMARTER
BEAT THE UK PHOTO BAN
PLAY GAMES ON YOUR TV

What's the Issue...?

When did you explain how to use the GlideX software to turn an old tablet into a second monitor?

Kevin Ripley

CA SAYS It was in Issue 714's Problems Solved – page 69. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/57015.

That was in Robert Irvine's 'Easy When You Know How' column in Issue 715 (page 74). Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/57014.

Was it my imagination or did you really once reveal how to create a 'Super God Mode' in Windows with 1,200 settings?

Clare Doyle

I can't find the issue where you explained the difference between CR2025 and CR2032 batteries. Can you help me?

Sam Moffatt

CA SAYS We did – in Issue 694's Workshop (page 38). Read it on our 2024 Back Issue USB Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.

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interfering with each other. Just goes to show that even though eSIMs have their advantages, things can still go wrong, especially where human error is involved.

T Ansel

Are your Buy It! recommendations too pricey?

I've been a subscriber for a number of years and your advice has been extremely helpful. This is especially true for the Buy It! section (pages 30-33). It's a really useful starting point when looking to replace items such as laptops and phones.

However, I've noticed a trend over the past few years to recommend more expensive models (including your 'Alternatives'). An example is your current Buy It! laptop (MSI Prestige A16 A1+), which costs £1,100. The Alternative (PCSpecialist 16 Fusion) isn't cheap either, at £956. I really can't justify spending that much, so could you do a 'Best Budget' version of at least some of the items? Your regular reviews do often highlight these, but it means lots of hunting through back issues!

Frank Reay

CA SAYS We're not intentionally recommending more expensive devices than a few years ago, but we take Frank's point about rising prices. The reality is the soaring inflation caused by the Covid lockdowns has caused permanently higher prices for electronics. Add tariff wars and there's no way prices are going back to pre-pandemic levels. In 2020 a decent budget laptop cost £300-£400. It's now more likely to start at £500.

Manufacturers are also now prioritising mid-range devices more than budget models. This means a laptop costing £700-£1,000 is often better value than cheaper machines. There are still plenty of budget bargains, though, such as our favourite desktop PC, Palicomp's AMD Cobra, which is still only £400 (see page 30). But Frank's idea of recommending a 'Best Budget' alternative is a good one, so we'll think about how we can better recommend cheaper devices.

Don't try this at home

I've seen some strange warnings on various products over the years, such as warnings of electric shocks on a radio that ran on two AA batteries. But on a DVD I bought from Asda recently I saw 'Security Protected – Remove before microwaving' on the side (pictured above). Maybe I've been playing my DVD incorrectly all these years!

John Hampton

STAR LETTER

Sideloading ban will guarantee new Fire TV Stick flops

Amazon has made a huge mistake in banning sideloading on its new Fire TV Stick 4K Select (Issue 723, page 55, pictured). I understand the need to clamp down on apps that allow illegal streaming of football. I can't believe how commonplace these cracked sticks are – loads of people I know use them. But there are plenty of legitimate reasons to sideload an app.

As an example, I use Kodi (www.snipca.com/57036) to stream films and TV legally. This app isn't available on the Amazon Appstore, so I sideloaded it onto my Fire TV Stick. Another good app to sideload is SmartTube (www.snipca.com/57037), which blocks ads on YouTube. I would call these apps acceptable 'hacks', not wrongdoing that needs to be eradicated.

The new Fire TV Stick 4K Select doesn't even allow apps that let you download files, such as ES File Explorer (www.snipca.com/57038) – which I've also sideloaded onto my stick. This is ridiculously overcautious from Amazon. It seems to have massively overreacted under pressure from copyright lawyers and media companies.

These restrictions alone are enough to make the Select a total flop, but it's the inability to use a VPN that will surely damn it to be one of the biggest tech calamities ever. If you don't believe me, read the one-star reviews on Amazon itself (www.snipca.com/57039). My prediction for 2026: nobody will buy this device and Amazon will be forced to replace it with a model that treats users as adults.

Steve Bolton

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Raspberry Pi 500+ is worth it

I thought your review of the Raspberry Pi 500+ (Issue 722, page 24) was a little harsh, especially your point that at £192 it's too expensive. I've bought one and like the changes that have been made, such as doubling the RAM to 16GB and the M.2 storage. It has a good keyboard, too. I found it for £175 at Mouser Electronics (www.snipca.com/57032). At this price, and taking each improvement as adding £25 to the cost of the original Raspberry Pi 500 (£96), I don't think your criticism about the cost is valid.

Timothy Ball

How criminals use webmail

Issue 722's Workshop on using webmail to write notes (page 38) reminds me of something I saw in a crime documentary. Apparently, that's what criminals do – write a draft message and leave it there. The other party logs on to the account and reads the message. It then gets deleted and no record of it exists!

Alan Armstrong

CA SAYS It's not only criminals who use this – spies do too. It's known as 'webmail as dead-drop' and featured in the BBC series *Spooks*. But it's far from perfect. CIA director David Petraeus was caught using the method to communicate with academic Paula Broadwell during their affair – read an interesting discussion at www.snipca.com/57035.

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can Openreach put up lines across my roof without permission?

LEAD CASE

Q An Openreach cabinet and a nearby service pole with overhead lines to neighbouring properties is causing a problem. A new line has appeared that only skirts the flat felted roof of my house by about six inches. This roof needs regular clearing and repair. Would I be responsible if I accidentally damaged this line while clearing my roof? And can Openreach just put up lines without an affected homeowner's permission?

Bob Wilson

A Yes, Openreach can run cables without Bob's specific permission as set out by the Communications Act 2003 and related Code of Practice for Electronic Communications Code operators. However, it must do so with minimal interference to the landowners' enjoyment and maintenance of their property.

It sounds like the line has been routed in a way that prevents Bob from carrying out necessary maintenance and using other parts of his property. He told us he's a keen sailor and has dinghies with 20-foot masts in his driveway.

Bob hasn't had any luck contacting Openreach, so instead he should report the problem. Openreach explains how to do this on its 'Reporting network damage or health and safety problems' (www.snipca.com/57064). He has taken photos of the cable, which he should send to Openreach. He should also keep records of his communications with the company. If it continues to ignore him he should report it to Ofcom.

If Openreach damaged his property then it would be responsible for repairing it. We also think it's unlikely to hold Bob responsible for any damage he causes while trying to carry out perfectly reasonable maintenance. However, we'll ask Openreach to confirm this.

CASE ONGOING

Should I pay 'shipping insurance' when buying online?

Q I often find that I'm asked to pay shipping insurance for goods I buy online. Sometimes there's a dire warning that if I don't and the goods are lost in transit, I will have no claim against the retailer. Is this correct?

George Wallace

A No, and it amounts to little more than a scam. When overseas sellers offer this insurance, they're playing on the fear the goods might get lost before arriving in the UK. But the seller is always responsible for ensuring safe delivery whether or not you pay for insurance. As with a UK seller, you can't sue the courier because you have no contract with it. It's always safer buying from a UK seller because your consumer rights are clearer and easier to enforce. UK retailers must deliver goods as described and in good condition, and if they fail to do so, you can demand a refund, replacement or repair under the Consumer Rights Act. Using a credit card or PayPal adds an extra layer of protection, letting you dispute a payment if the item doesn't arrive.

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

Report misbehaving firms like IObit to the CMA

We're updating our advice to Richard Hall (Issue 723) and asking him to report IObit to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). It told us last month to ask the public to contact it with cases so it can make the most of its new powers to fine companies without having to take them to court.

To recap, IObit took four payments from Richard's bank account (£75, £55, £27 and £157) even though he'd only requested one upgrade for IObit Pro. He had called the company many times and sent several emails but wasn't getting anywhere.

The CMA's new powers – part of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act that became law in April – allows it to impose fines of up to 10 per cent of a company's global turnover and up to £300,000 for individual directors. IObit is based in San Francisco but the CMA's decisions can be pursued through foreign courts based on international cooperation agreements and legal frameworks.

As well as reporting IObit through the CMA (at www.snipca.com/57182) Richard should continue chasing his bank for a chargeback. His bank should do this without question, though IObit might challenge it.

Why won't CyberLink give me activation code?

Q I've used CyberLink Power Director 9 since 2010 – recently loading it from the original disc to another computer. But I'm being asked for an activation code which I don't have. CyberLink is no help, telling me it stopped supporting this old program. I'm 88 years old so don't want to buy new software. Is CyberLink allowed to refuse me an activation code?

Brian Turton

A Yes, CyberLink is allowed to refuse to give Brian an activation code. Software companies don't have to provide these if it has stopped supporting a program. Brian might own a disc for the software or a previous installation, but that doesn't mean he can expect the company to reactivate it on a new machine. Some users look for workarounds, but officially, the company isn't required to help.

Indeed, some companies might refuse activation codes even if they haven't officially ended support. They might find it harder to justify this in court, though, should they be sued.

We're not sure when CyberLink stopped supporting PowerDirector 9, but there have been many versions since. Brian could look online for an activation code, but there's no guarantee these would work, or that PowerDirector would work smoothly on Windows 10 or 11.

We'll contact CyberLink to see if it can make a goodwill gesture to such a loyal customer, but in the meantime Brian could see if the free version of PowerDirector (www.snipca.com/57083) does what he needs.

CASE ONGOING

Can I return a Black Friday purchase after Christmas?

Q I bought a laptop from Amazon in the Black Friday sales, and plan to give it as a present to my grandson for Christmas. If he finds it's not suitable or faulty, can he still return it in January?

Ellen Parker

A Probably yes, but the retailer's response will depend on his reason for returning it. First, Ellen should check whether the retailer has an extended returns policy over Christmas, and what the terms of this are.

In particular, she should ask how soon after Christmas this period ends, and whether her son would be allowed to unbox and turn on the laptop. He should certainly avoid registering or downloading any software on it, and keep all the packaging.

Whatever the retailer's policy, these don't affect consumer law, which gives you 14 days after delivery to reject a purchase. The law also gives you 30 days to demand a refund for a faulty item. These deadlines for many Black Friday purchases would typically have passed by Christmas, which is why retailers usually extend their returns period by a few weeks.

It's important to note that retailers can only change their policy if it makes it more generous than the existing law. Nothing they change around Christmas can weaken your rights.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Wired2Fire gave superb advice for my Flight Sim PC

I'm tempted to buy your new favourite Buy It! mini PC from Wired2Fire (see page 32) because I've had great service from the company in the past. I wanted to buy a desktop PC powerful enough to deal with Microsoft Flight Simulator, but didn't know where to start.

Thankfully the team at Wired2Fire said they'd had many similar requests and so knew which components to offer me. They gave me some differently priced options and explained what I'd be getting for my money. What impressed me is how easy it was to contact them by phone or email.

I've been using the PC for over a year now and it's fantastic. I don't know whether Wired2Fire's new mini PC (AMD R8845) will suit me, but I do know that the company will give me honest advice if I ring them to ask.

Mike Smith

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Wired2Fire

- **Email** sales@wired2fire.co.uk
- **Online form** www.snipca.com/57084
- **Phone** 01306 882211

Grow Your Family Tree

Criminal mugshots are nothing new – they began over 150 years ago. Follow **Richard Holt's** advice to...

Search photos of Victorian prisoners

By the 1870s, it was common practice to photograph prisoners for identification and record-keeping. A number of archives and collections have preserved these images, giving us a rare glimpse of our ancestors behind bars.

The National Archives holds licences for the early release of prisoners in the records PCOM 3 (males, www.snipca.com/57000) and PCOM 4 (females, www.snipca.com/57001). Issued under the Penal Servitude Acts of 1853 and 1864, licences were granted to convicts released early for good behaviour.

The records span 1853–1887, with files from 1871 onwards often including photos. Many also contain letters or notes from the prisoner, medical histories and reports of any misconduct during their sentence.

These records have been digitised and are available in Findmypast's 'England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment, 1770–1935' collection (www.snipca.com/57003). Enter a name then either 'PCOM 3' (for male prisoners) or 'PCOM 4' (females) in the keyword field.

I found what appeared to be an interesting record for Sarah Fine by searching National Archives' PCOM 4 catalogue (www.snipca.com/57004). It said she also used the aliases Ann Lewis and Margaret Sarah Cole. Searching for her in Findmypast revealed her actual surname as Vine, and that she was a 69-year-old widow without – she claimed – any living relatives or friends. She had been found guilty of thefts between 1865 and 1882.

Some photos showed the prisoner's hands to identify those who had lost fingers

One of the files in Findmypast includes a photo of Sarah showing her hands (1 in our screenshot above). These were taken to help identify prisoners who had lost fingers in accidents. The file, dated July 1885 2, confirms that Sarah is to "be set at liberty" (ie, released) within 30 days 3. It also includes an 1882 clipping from the *Bucks Herald* newspaper describing Sarah as "a hardened criminal".

Browse specific prison albums

The National Archives holds more prisoner photograph albums in the PCOM 2 series, which are part of Findmypast's same 'England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment, 1770–1935' collection (www.snipca.com/57006). These include albums for Wandsworth Prison (1872–1873), Pentonville Prison (1875–1885) and Oxford Gaol (1870–1881), where I found the photos pictured below.

You can read more about the Wandsworth albums and view sample records in this National Archives research guide (www.snipca.com/57007).

Many local archives also have albums of prisoner photos. Buckinghamshire Archives, for example, has a searchable collection of prisoners who served time at Aylesbury Gaol (www.snipca.com/57008).

You'll find more photos in books such as Elizabeth Jack's *A Rogues' Gallery: Victorian Prisoners of Gloucester Gaol* (www.snipca.com/57010), and Barry Redfern's *Victorian Villains: Prisoners from Newcastle Gaol 1871-1873* (www.snipca.com/57011).

These four prisoners were inmates at Oxford Gaol

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

I've found evidence that, much to my surprise, my distant Irish ancestors might have owned quite a lot of land in the 1850s. Are there records that might prove this?
Simon Matthews

Try searching Griffith's Valuation, which is free at Ask About Ireland (www.snipca.com/57012). Held between 1847 and 1865, land was surveyed and valued for levying a property tax to help fund poor relief. Type your ancestor's first and last names, then select the county where they lived. If the name is common, narrow the results by choosing barony, union or parish. The entries list only the head of the household, recorded as the Occupier.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Find ancestors who fought at Trafalgar

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Feeling worn out? You're not alone. Nearly half of us in the UK aren't getting our recommended daily amount of magnesium, an essential mineral for energy release.

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Our diets can lack good sources of magnesium like kale, spinach, black beans, nuts, bananas and whole grains. To help, many people take supplements containing magnesium oxide.

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That's why FutureYou Cambridge developed Magnesium+, made with magnesium lactate – an organic formulation that's twice as absorbable as magnesium oxide and gentler on the stomach.

It also stays in the body longer. Magnesium+ includes vitamin B6, which helps reduce tiredness and supports energy metabolism.

Hundreds of Trustpilot reviewers feel positive about Magnesium+. Mark, 49, says, 'Since moving to Magnesium+ I've really noticed I recover quicker. I've more energy and I'm less tired than I used to be.'

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- **Highly Absorbable Formula:** Magnesium lactate for better absorption, easy on the stomach
- **Added vitamin B6:** Helps reduce tiredness and fatigue and support normal energy metabolism

Developed in Cambridge

Science you can trust

Letterbox Friendly

Award-winning Customer Care

Trustpilot EXCELLENT Over 15,000 reviews

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

PDF EDITOR

PDFgear 2.1.13

www.snipca.com/57092
What you need: Windows 10 or 11, or macOS

It's been nearly a year since PDFgear was last updated, though its developer hasn't been idle in 2025. Last summer, they released the brilliant AI-powered scanning app PDFgear Scan (www.snipca.com/57085), for Android and iOS – see our Workshop in Issue 719 (page 38).

However, it's the desktop version of the free PDF editor we're most interested in, and this update justifies the wait. It adds a host of useful tools and makes welcome tweaks to the program's interface without sacrificing its simplicity.

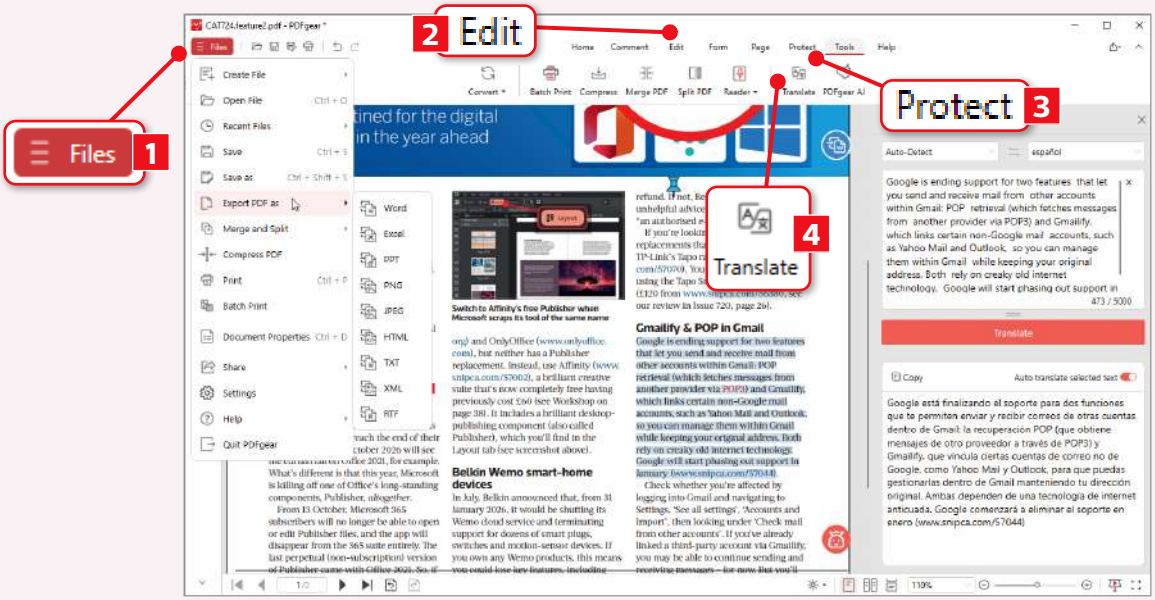
The biggest design change is the addition of a Files menu in the top-left corner of the main window. This gives you easy access to your recent PDFs, essential options such as export, merge and split, and PDFgear's Settings panel. The Print window has been redesigned and added a new setting for printing multiple pages per sheet of paper. The 'PDF to Image' and 'Image to PDF' conversion tools have also been improved.

PDFgear can now create PDFs directly from your scanner and its enhanced OCR feature can turn scanned documents into searchable text. A new Redact tool lets you black out sensitive information in documents, and you can delete selected text without messing up the layout.

We particularly like the new options for adding images to PDFs and editing existing pictures, such as by rotating or replacing them. These features are usually only available in paid-for PDF software like Adobe Acrobat Pro, so PDFgear will save you money.

Other handy new tools allow you to resize PDF pages, add new signature fields to your documents and apply custom stamps using the text, images, colour and shapes of your choice. Best of all, PDFgear can now translate text to and from 10 different languages, including French, German, Dutch, Chinese and Japanese.

We were slightly worried PDFgear may have introduced premium-only features in this new version, but happily it's still completely free to use.



1 PDFgear's new Files menu gives you easy access to commonly used options as well as your recently opened files. Click the 'Export PDF as' submenu to convert the current PDF to formats including Word, Excel, RTF, JPEG and PNG.

2 The Edit tab includes lots of useful options, including the new ability to add your own images to PDFs. It's also now possible to attach files to documents by pinning them to relevant sections. Double-click a pin to open the attachment.

3 Click the Protect tab to access features including the new Redact tool for blacking out sensitive data in PDFs and the new Flatten tool, which merges comments with the document so they can't be edited or copied by other people.

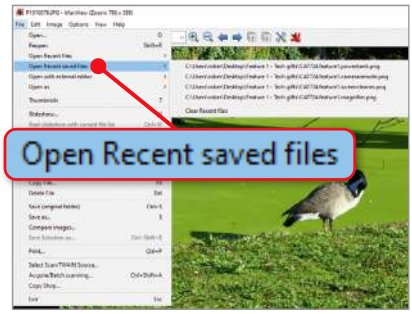
4 To translate foreign text in PDFs, click the Tools tab and choose Translate. PDFgear will detect the language and translate it to English – if not, switch on 'Auto translate selected text'. You can also translate English text to 10 other languages.

IMAGE VIEWER

IrfanView 4.73

www.irfanview.com

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



Our favourite free image viewer now has an ARM 64 version that works more efficiently on PCs with ARM processors. IrfanView has also added several new options to make it even easier to use. You can now reopen recently saved images by clicking the File menu and selecting 'Open Recent saved files' (see screenshot), and set a picture as the wallpaper for multiple monitors. Click the Options menu and choose 'Set as Wallpaper' then 'Span (over all screens)'. IrfanView now lets you change its selection shape from the default rectangle to a circle – click the Edit menu and choose 'Set selection shape and grid' then 'Use round selection'. In the same menu, you can crop an image to just the visible area if the program's scrollbars are hiding part of it – which sometimes happens with larger pictures.

FILE-SHARING TOOL

AltSendme 0.2.1

www.snipca.com/57082

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS or Linux

This new tool offers a simple, speedy and secure way to send large files to other people. You don't need to create an account, there's no limit on file size and items you share are protected by end-to-end encryption. To use AltSendme, both you and the recipient need to have the program installed and open. Select the file or folder to share, and click Start Sharing to generate a 'ticket' (see screenshot). Copy the ticket into an email, send it to the other person and they can paste it into AltSendme's Receive tab to download the file. Because AltSendme is a new program, it triggers a SmartScreen warning, but it's safe to use so just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'. You also need to allow it access through your Windows Firewall, when prompted.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Freemake Video Converter

www.snipca.com/57087

Price: $69.95 (£53) per year, $99 (£75) lifetime licence

Free trial: N/A **What you need:** Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

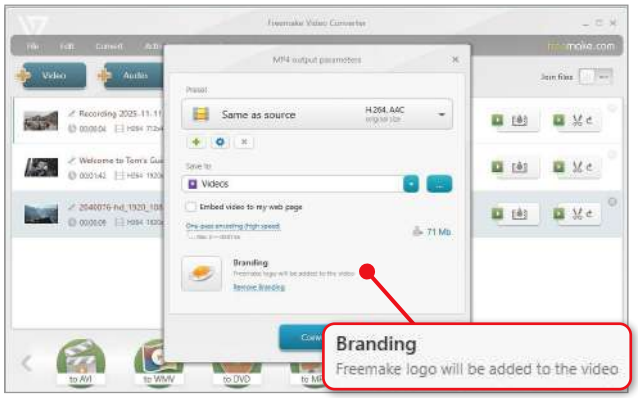
Freemake Video Converter was once a great free program for converting videos, but became bloated with ads and bundled junk. It's just received its first update (to version 5.0) for three years, so we were intrigued to find out if it's improved – surely 103 million users (as its website claims) can't be wrong?

The program installed without any sign of unwanted 'offers', but we were immediately greeted with a big advert for the Freemake Mega Pack. We noticed the interface has barely changed since we last used it several years ago, and still includes an option for converting to BlackBerry.

The highest available resolution was 1080p and there was no mention of newer video formats such as WEBM and HEVC. Still, Freemake Video Converter is easy to use, with big buttons and a friendly (if dated) design.

More annoying was the Branding warning that the 'Freemake logo will be added to the video' (see screenshot). This appeared for every format and resolution, and the resulting large watermark sat right in the middle of the video – making it unusable. The conversion was also painfully slow, taking six minutes to process a 60MB file.

The only way to avoid the Freemake logo and speed up conversion is to buy the aforementioned Mega Pack. This unlocks extra features and Full HD, but is extortionately priced and not worth the money.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

With its irksome watermark, Freemake effectively holds your videos to ransom until you pay for its Mega Pack. It shouldn't be promoted as 'absolutely free' and there are better video converters such as the genuinely free HandBrake (www.snipca.com/57089).

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

What's a good Google Maps alternative?

Q I'm going to try to de-Google my life in 2026, using other apps that don't track you so aggressively. I've found great alternatives for Gmail, Drive and Search, but I'm struggling to find one for Google Maps. I need it mostly to find amenities like parking and petrol stations when using my phone, but I favour simplicity over features.

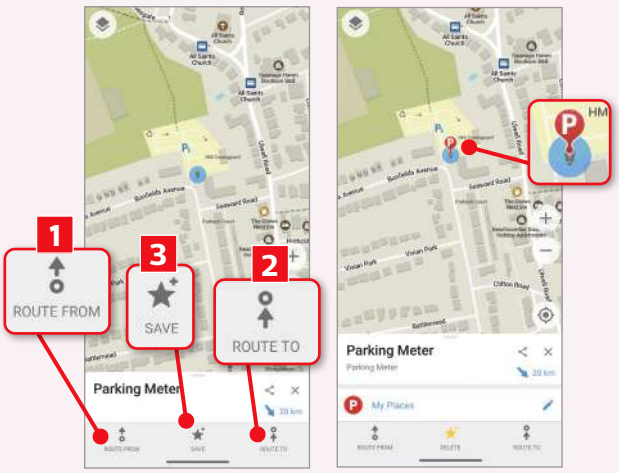
David Rhodes

A You'll probably like the Silver Award winner in Issue 696's feature 'Stop Google Maps spying on you' (page 62), Organic Maps (https://organicmaps.app). It's simpler to use than our Gold winner Magic Earth (www.magicearth.com) and just as private – neither app tracks your personal data for advertising purposes.

When you install it, grant it permission to access your location and it will download maps from OpenStreetMap. One of its best features is the ability to find nearby amenities without you typing anything. Simply tap the search button then the Categories tab and select a category such as 'Where to eat', Petrol, Parking, ATM, Pharmacy or Toilet.

It will then show you local options and how close they are. Tap one and it will appear on a 3D map. Now tap either 'Route from' (1 in our screenshot below left) or 'Route to' 2 and select a mode of transport at the top.

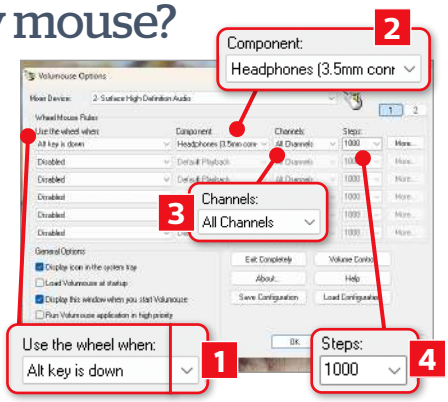
You can also tap Save 3 to save that particular result, and 'pin' it to the map (see screenshot below right). To see your saved searches tap the icon with two stars and three dots on Organic Maps' home page.



Can I control PC volume through my mouse?

Q I want to add more functionality to my mouse, such as controlling my PC's volume. Will I need to buy an expensive new mouse, or is there a program that allows me to do this?

Alan Blunt



A Try Volumouse from NirSoft (it downloads automatically from www.snipca.com/56985) which lets you control volume, screen brightness and window transparency. Click 'Use the wheel when' to choose when Volumouse works (for example, when 'Alt key is down' – 1 in screenshot), and Component to choose what it controls (Headphones 2). The 'Channels' menu 3 sets the speakers, while Steps 4 sets the increment that changes when you scroll.

Can I download multiple videos from Internet Archive?

Q I often download videos from the Internet Archive (https://archive.org), but I do these individually, not in batches. Is there a way to download several in one go?

Dean Lennon

A Downloading files as torrents will let you grab multiple videos simultaneously. Install the program Transmission (www.snipca.com/56986) then click the Torrent option (see screenshot) for your Internet Archive videos. Now click the File menu in Transmission, choose Open and select the torrents on your computer. Click 'Open' for each torrent to start downloading it – if no other users are currently sharing the file, it will be queued for download.

Email us your questions at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

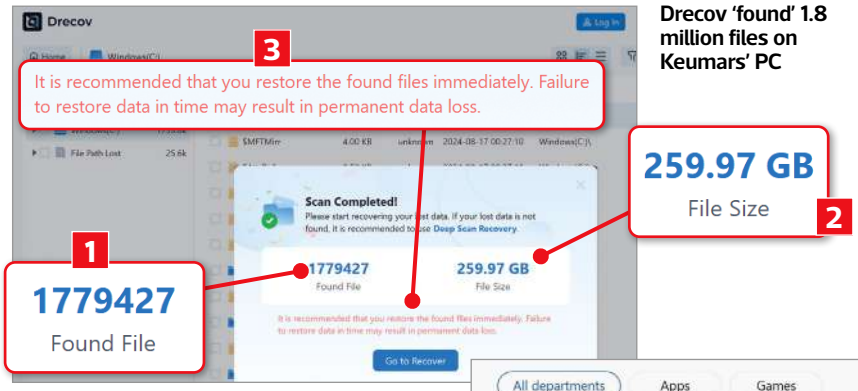
Drecov's photo-recovery scaremongering

There are many reasons I'm thankful I married my wife, not least because she's far more sensible than me. She proved this recently when I realised she had backed up photos of our honeymoon in Japan earlier this year. It meant my horror at accidentally deleting them was mercifully short-lived.

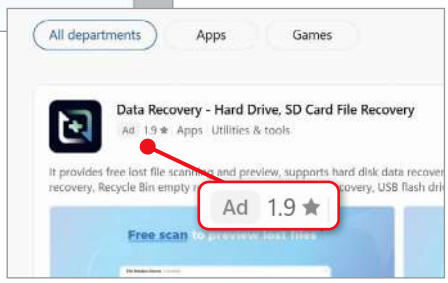
After showering her with gratitude I vowed to find a decent photo-recovery tool – avoiding all the scammy apps that claim to find your photos, but then charge the GDP of Belgium to recover them.

One prime example is 'Data Recovery - Hard Drive, SD Card File Recovery' (Drecov for short) from Hong Kong developers Panda Office. Its advert on the Microsoft Store shows a 1.9-star rating (see screenshot right), but it's 4.3 on the Store page (www.snipca.com/57045).

This inconsistency could be down to different versions of the app (old/new; UK/elsewhere), but in my experience 1.9 is closer to the mark. In fact it's wildly generous.



Drecov 'found' 1.8 million files on Keumars' PC



Even a 1.9-star rating for Drecov is wildly generous

Drecov claims to use 'AI intelligent scanning' to comb through your hard drive and recover your data. And it showed Einstein levels of intelligence to find nearly 1.8 million lost files (1 in our screenshot above) totalling 260GB 2. But I'd have shown Baldrick levels of stupidity to fall for that. It works out at roughly two photos taken every minute we were in Japan.

It was nonsense of course, and Drecov's red warning 3 is classic scaremongering. I clicked 'Go to Recover' nonetheless and Drecov demanded $39.99 (£30) to recover even a single photo. Nobody tell my wife – she might invoice me.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Judson Althoff, Microsoft

www.snipca.com/56987

"It is time to demand more of AI to solve humanity's biggest challenges by democratizing intelligence, obsolescing the mundane and unlocking creativity. This is the notion of becoming Frontier: to empower human ambition and find AI-first differentiation in everything we do to maximize an organization's potential and our impact on society."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We should be "obsolescing" jargon instead, but without long words how can we make AI sound more important than it really is?

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Meta

Imagine if 10 per cent of ITV's revenue came from adverts promoting scams and banned products. We doubt it would survive such a scandal. And yet that's the proportion of money – a staggering $16bn – Meta forecast it would make in 2024 from these type of dodgy ads on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

This admission comes from Meta itself in internal documents leaked to news agency Reuters (www.snipca.com/56989). The ads push dangerous nonsense like illegal medical products and fake investment schemes (pictured). Meta also admits that its services show users 15 billion scam ads every day.

But the most damning revelation is that Meta bans advertisers only if it's 95-per-cent certain they're fraudsters. If Meta is less sure but still suspicious, it allows the advert but charges the advertiser more. It's win-win for Meta, but lose-lose for all users.

DESKTOP PC | **£1,498** from Dell www.snipca.com/56981

Dell Tower Plus EBT2250

Configure it out

Flexibility is the name of the game for Dell's powerful desktop PC. Its adaptable case and motherboard mean it can be configured as anything from a budget home-office computer to a powerhouse for making videos or playing games.

Its basic specification (£849) provides an Intel Core Ultra 5 processor, integrated graphics and 16GB of RAM. At the top end (£3,399) you get a Core Ultra 9 chip, Nvidia RTX 5080 graphics card and 64GB RAM. But the best option is the mid-range version we've tested here, with its Core Ultra 7 chip, 32GB RAM and an RTX 5070 graphics card.

> "Can be a budget home-office PC or a gaming powerhouse"

Unlike more dedicating gaming systems, the EBT2250 keeps its engine room under wraps. There are no glass panels, flashy RGB lights or futuristic water-cooling systems, just an understated mini-tower chassis in a choice of light grey or near-black finishes. It comes with a matching Dell Pro keyboard and mouse, which are basic and functional rather than outstanding.

Connectivity is well covered. Three USB-A ports, one USB-C port, a headphone jack and a microSD card reader are all easy to access from the front panel. At the rear (pictured right) you have six more USB-A ports, a Thunderbolt 4 port, an HDMI output and a choice of optical and line-out audio outputs, plus a line-in for a microphone. There's a 2.5Gbps Ethernet port for direct connections to a high-speed router and ultra-fast broadband services, though you also have built-in Wi-Fi 7 if you prefer a wireless setup.

The big advantage of a desktop PC like this is that you have scope to upgrade later. There are three PCIe slots for graphics cards, while the two DIMM slots will hold up to two 32GB sticks of RAM. There's an additional M.2 socket for an extra NVMe SSD, plus two bays where you could fit a traditional hard drive or a cheap eSATA SSD. You can start with a basic system now, then add or replace components as you need to.

However, in its current state the EBT2250 isn't short of muscle. It can handle demanding programs like video-editing or encoding with ease, and with its eight performance cores and 12 efficiency cores, neither demanding software nor background tasks slow it down.

The RTX 5070 card hasn't quite got enough potency for 4K gaming, but you can play fairly demanding titles with frame rates of 60 to 80fps at maximum settings at a Full HD 1080p resolution or push the frame rate even higher with Nvidia's upscaling technology.

Even when pushed to converting video or running challenging games, the EBT2250 stays fairly quiet, with little of the dominating fan noise you get with some specialist gaming PCs.

In its cheapest form, this PC is still significantly more expensive than budget offerings like the Palicomp AMD Cobra (£400 from www.snipca.com/43515, reviewed in Issue 643 and still our overall favourite – see page 30). But paying extra for EBT2250 gets you superior components, better connectivity and some serious upgrade potential.

SPECIFICATIONS

20-core Intel Core Ultra 7 265 processor • 32GB RAM • Nvidia RTX 5070 12GB graphics • 1TB SSD • 4x USB 2.0 ports • 3x USB 3.2 Gen 1 • 1x USB-C 3.2 Gen 2 • Thunderbolt 4 • HDMI • S/PDIF optical • 3x 3.5mm audio jack (headphone, line in, line out) • MicroSD card reader • 2.5Gbps Ethernet port • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • 750W power supply • Windows 11 Home • 373x 173x427mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/56981

VERDICT An easily upgradeable desktop PC that can take on just about any job you throw at it

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Wired 2 Fire Ultima WS £613 High performance from a low-cost PC, with an overclocked eight-core processor, integrated graphics and a 1TB SSD

TABLET | **£169** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/56982

OnePlus Pad Lite

Stream on

If you're looking for an attractive, affordable tablet for entertainment the OnePlus Pad Lite could fit the bill. It's almost half the price of the basic Apple iPad and just a tad more expensive than the Amazon Fire HD 10, yet it gives you solid specifications, apps from the Google Play Store and OnePlus's superb OxygenOS interface. The latter is one of the better adaptations of Android, with hardly any bloatware and a lean, focused approach.

> "The screen makes it ideal for watching films and TV"

The design borrows heavily from OnePlus's excellent Pad 3, with a slim well-built, light-blue aluminium shell that meets IP42 requirements for water resistance – enough to survive a light spill or the odd drop of rain. It's thicker than the iPad at 7.4mm and probably too heavy to hold vertically single-handed, but perfectly comfortable when held horizontally with a hand on either side.

It's the screen that makes it ideal for watching films and TV. It's reasonably bright for a cheap tablet at close to 500cd/m², with vibrant colours and plenty of contrast. The 1920x1200-pixel resolution means it's not as sharp as the iPad's 2360x1640-pixel screen, but that doesn't make it any less immersive when streaming. The stereo speakers also play their part here, delivering a surprisingly powerful sound.

Costs have to be cut somewhere to reach this price, however, and they're mostly on the inside. We get basic Wi-Fi 5 rather than Wi-Fi 6 and two mediocre 5-megapixel cameras that won't see much use beyond video chats. There's no fingerprint scanner and you're stuck with 128GB of storage, with no microSD card slot to add more. That's fine for basic use, but not if you're downloading a lot of movies for offline playback.

Most of all, while the Helio G100 processor will get the job done when streaming, browsing and switching between apps, you'll see some delay creeping in if you're running more demanding games or productivity apps. In our tests it ran slightly faster than Amazon's Fire HD 10, but it won't run several apps at once as smoothly as the iPad.

Still, battery life is good. OnePlus claims 11 hours of video playback from a single charge, and in our tests we found that an hour of streaming only drained the battery by eight per cent. It also supports 33-Watt charging speeds, meaning you can recharge in less than two hours. That matters when you have a long flight or train trip to get through, which is exactly where the Pad Lite shines.

SPECIFICATIONS

Octa-core MediaTek Helio G100 processor • 6GB to 8GB RAM • 128GB storage • 11in 1920x1280-pixel IPS screen • 5-megapixel rear camera • 5-megapixel front camera • IP42 ingress protection • Wi-Fi 5 • Bluetooth 5.4 • OxygenOS 15.0.1 (Android 15) • 167x 255x7.4mm (HxWxD) • 530g • Two-year Warranty www.snipca.com/56982

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Tom's Hardware (www.tomshardware.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT A brilliant budget tablet for streaming and browsing, while the screen and software compensate for average performance

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Apple iPad 11 £329
Better all-round performance, a superb screen and superior software make the iPad worth paying extra for

LAPTOP | **£1,199** from Currys www.snipca.com/56993

Medion Erazer Deputy P1

Game changer

German manufacturer Medion's latest gaming laptop gives you the specifications you need to run resource-hungry games but at a lower cost than you'd normally expect. It doesn't make the best first impression, however. The plastics used in the chassis feel cheap and flex under pressure, while the plain design is hardly typical of gaming machines.

Still, that's arguably a bonus if you're not fond of massive vents and RGB lighting. And, for all its 24mm-thick body and 2.25kg weight, the Erazer Deputy 15 P1 feels comparatively slim and light. There's an unusually large gap between the screen and the keyboard section when it's open, but this seems to help keep things cool and move heat away from the display.

> "A laptop with the heft to tackle any game or program"

Most of the connectivity is found on either side, with three USB 3.2 ports, a single USB-C port with DisplayPort support and a 3.5mm headphone socket. At the rear (pictured below) there are HDMI and Mini DisplayPort outputs, along with a power socket and a Gigabit Ethernet port. The two screen outputs are ideal if you want to hook up a couple of monitors, but the power cable has an L-shaped plug, which means it trails across the HDMI or Ethernet ports when the laptop is charging.

The keyboard has been designed for gaming, with slightly narrow but widely spaced keys. These work brilliantly when you're battling to reach the next level, but less so when you're typing, where the spacing can get in the way of accuracy. The touchpad is also somewhat cramped, though the surface is responsive and smooth to the touch.

You can see some signs of cost-cutting on the screen. It's very reflective; colours aren't as vibrant as on more expensive gaming laptops; and the 1920x1080-pixel resolution is the minimum requirement for the 15.6in screen size. All the same, the image is impressively sharp, while the 144Hz refresh rate is perfect for fast-paced action games.

Crucially, performance is great for a laptop at this price. In non-gaming benchmark tests its Intel Core 7 250H processor helps it keep up with the competition, beating the Gigabyte Gaming A16 (£1,099 from www.snipca.com/56491, reviewed Issue 721).

Its Nvidia RTX 5060 GPU will run most advanced games at a Full HD 1080p resolution with all the detail settings set to maximum, particularly if you use Nvidia's upscaling and frame-generation technology to give frame rates a boost.

With both enabled, we saw frame rates of over 250fps in some games at medium settings, and over 100fps at higher detail settings. What's more, it stays cool while doing so, even if the noisy fans will make you want to plug some headphones in.

Battery life could be better. While the Deputy 15 P1 will get through six hours 47 minutes of video playback without a recharge, it couldn't quite reach two hours in our gaming battery tests. By comparison, the Gigabyte Gaming A16 lasted an hour longer.

Like the A16, this is a powerful laptop with the heft to tackle any game or program, but here you get the full-speed 115W version of the RTX 5060 rather than the lesser 85W version, which will give you smoother frame rates in more demanding games. If you can live with the cheap feel of its build, this is a value-packed gaming machine.

SPECIFICATIONS

14-core Intel Core 7 250H processor • 16GB RAM • Nvidia RTX 5060 115W graphics • 15.6in 1920x1080-pixel 144Hz IPS screen • 1TB SSD • 1x USB 3.2 Gen 1 port • 1x USB-A 3.2 Gen 2 port • 1x USB-C 3.2 Gen 2 port • 1x USB 2.0 port • 1x HDMI port • 1x Mini DisplayPort • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • 1x Gigabit Ethernet port • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.2 • Windows 11 Home • 247x361x24mm (HxWxD) • 2.25Kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/56993

VERDICT It looks and feels like a budget gaming laptop, but the specs are a cut above the bargain-basement norm

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Gigabyte Gaming A16 £1,099 Versatile laptop for work and play with a sleek design and longer battery life

ALL-IN-ONE PC | **£1,399** from Currys www.snipca.com/57034

Lenovo Yoga U7 27in

Altogether now

With its vibrant screen and slick, ergonomic design, the Lenovo Yoga U7 may actually convert some sceptics to the all-in-one PC. You can't upgrade it like a desktop PC, but you get an elegant and space-saving system.

In fact, the Yoga U7 is one of the most attractive Windows all-in-ones we've tested. The case is plastic, with 30-per-cent recycled plastics, yet it could pass for aluminium at a glance. The matching mouse and keyboard might be basic, but they look the part. The round base can pivot 90 degrees in either direction, while the display can tilt upwards by 10 degrees, downwards by five degrees and lift by up to 70mm. It's easy to find a comfortable working height and angle.

The screen is sharp and rich in detail, with a 1920x1440-pixel resolution and a 120Hz refresh rate for smoother scrolling. In our tests it delivered impressive colour coverage and accuracy, so it's great for viewing photos and video, and even a spot of serious image editing. It has an HDMI input as well as output, so you can also use it with a laptop, gaming console or TV streaming stick.

The sound isn't quite as impressive, despite four built-in speakers and Dolby Atmos support. It's heavy on the mid-range and not as clear as the audio you'll get from a good set of external PC speakers. Still, there's nothing wrong with the five-megapixel webcam, nor the connectivity. You have three USB 3.2 ports to work with plus two USB-C ports. The latter will even support USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 external SSDs.

Its internal components have more in common with a laptop than a standard desktop PC, but with a 16-core Core Ultra 7 255H processor and 16GB of RAM it has enough about it to run almost any creative or office program.

In our tests it's slightly slower than Apple's iMac M4 or Mac Mini M4 chips in single-core performance, but faster when it comes to multi-tasking and running complex, resource-hungry programs. It can also handle some light gaming provided you're not expecting high-quality graphics.

There's no way to upgrade this unit later, with both the processor and RAM soldered in place – that's the compromise you make buying an all-in-one. But this particular model is a treat to use.

SPECIFICATIONS

16-core Intel Core Ultra 7 255H processor • 16GB RAM • Integrated Intel Arc 140T graphics • 27in 2560x1440-pixel 120Hz IPS screen • 1TB SSD • 3x USB 3.2 Gen 2 ports • 2x USB-C 3.2 Gen 2x2 ports • 2x HDMI ports • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • 1x Gigabit Ethernet port • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Windows 11 Home • 565x614x235mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/57034

VERDICT With a sharp screen, wide connectivity and strong performance, this is a stellar all-in-one PC

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Apple iMac M4 £1,249 Still the best all-in-one you can buy, though you'll need to pay extra to match the Yoga U7's storage

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Upscaling

What is it?

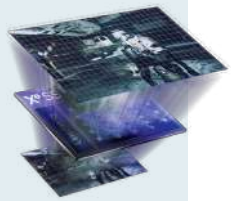
It's the technology that converts images or video to a higher resolution so that a 1080p image will look like a 4K image when shown on a 4K screen. Whenever we talk about graphics cards or graphics processors, we're talking more specifically about processes that enable games to display visuals at a lower resolution, then upscale them, to reduce the workload. This allows the graphics processor to generate each frame faster, meaning smoother-running games.

How does it work?

Early upscaling technology simply enlarged and smoothed out the image, then applied filters to make the edges look sharp. However, modern techniques use AI that's trained on the way the specific game generates its graphics. They take the pixels in each frame, analyse them, then work out how the extra pixels *would* look if that frame was rendered at a higher resolution. An upscaled 4K image can look as good as an actual 4K frame.

What are the specs?

Each graphics chip manufacturer has their own tech. Nvidia pioneered the AI approach with DLSS (Deep Learning Super Sampling), while AMD has FSR (Fidelity FX Super Resolution) and Intel has XeSS (Xe Super Sampling, pictured). New versions are released periodically, with the most recent being DLSS4, FSR4 and XeSS3, though you may need the latest graphics cards to use them.



Can I change it later?

DLSS only runs on Nvidia RTX graphics cards, but it's the most widely supported upscaling technology in games. However, support is growing for FSR and XeSS, and both can run to some extent on non-AMD or Intel graphics cards.

MOBILE ROUTER | **£456** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57028

TP-Link M8550

Sends the right signal

TP-Link's mobile 5G router can connect up to 32 Wi-Fi devices to the internet over a 5G or 4G cellular connection without any being tethered to your smartphone. It's a tempting option if you're living off-grid, would like broadband for your caravan, or need something you can use while on holiday or working in the field. It's powered by its own battery and won't chew through your smartphone's charge in mere hours. Moreover, using it gives you the kind of security and control you won't get with public Wi-Fi.

It's a robust, rectangular box measuring 135x74mm and is 21mm thick. It isn't waterproof, but it slips easily into a pocket or a backpack. The battery is removable and lasts roughly 14 hours on a single charge. Alternatively, you can recharge from a USB power bank over the M8550's USB-C connection.

Provided you can get a four-to-five bar 4G or 5G signal, you can expect impressive speeds. In fact, we found the 5G connection more than fast enough for video calls, streaming video/music and uploading/downloading hefty files.

It creates its own Wi-Fi 6E network and handles multiple devices without any delay creeping in. What's more, you can connect to your home router through its Gigabit Ethernet port and use the M8550 as a backup internet connection, ready to take over if your regular fibre link goes down.

Connection speeds vary with the network and signal. We had high upload and download speeds in a local cafe with a stable 5G signal, but noticeably slower speeds in a van while in the New Forest on 4G. We also found we could get a better and more reliable connection by placing the router on the van's roof, though only while parked, of course.

Using the 2.4in touchscreen you can manage all its settings, and there's a handy data-usage display to keep track of how much you've consumed. The M8550 also packs in other useful features, including a microSD card slot you can use as a network drive for streaming music or swapping files between devices, plus a built-in VPN.

This is a fairly expensive device, and you need to budget in the cost (typically starting around £16 a month) of its SIM and mobile-data plan – it can't share one with your smartphone. However, if you're living or working on the move it's a great companion, giving you speedy broadband almost anywhere you go.

SPECIFICATIONS

5G connectivity – 3.4Gbps download, 900Mbps upload • 4G connectivity – 1.6Gbps download • Tri-band Wi-Fi 6E • Gigabit Ethernet port • USB-C port • MicroSD card slot • 135x74x21mm • 275g

www.snipca.com/57028

VERDICT A pricey but convenient way to get speedy Wi-Fi while you're on the move

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Netgear Nighthawk M7 Pro £900 Fast 5G networking on the move with Wi-Fi 7, but twice the price

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's a good laptop for CAD and 3D printing?

Q I need a new laptop, but I'm not sure what specification I need. I mainly want it for 3D design software like FreeCAD, photo editing, 2D image to 3D model generation and 3D printing. I would like to pay around £1,000 but can be a little flexible. Can you recommend some suitable, good-value options?

Dennis Prescott

A There are some great laptops around this price, including our current favourite, the MSI Prestige A16 AI+ (£1,100 from www.snipca.com/55962, see page 30) and the PCSpecialist Fusion 16 (£970 from www.snipca.com/55094, pictured). The A16 has a powerful AMD Ryzen AI 9 processor and impressive 16in screen, but you could go for the Fusion 16 and save £100.

You're still getting a superb 16in 2560x1600-pixel screen with a matte finish and vivid colour, plus an eight-core Intel Core Ultra 5 226V processor with integrated Intel Arc graphics. The Core Ultra 5 won't give you the same speeds as the Ryzen AI 9 in demanding programs, but FreeCAD and the types of app you mention either run online or focus on single-core performance, where the Core Ultra 5 excels. You could even bump up the storage to a 1TB SSD without blowing your budget by more than £20.

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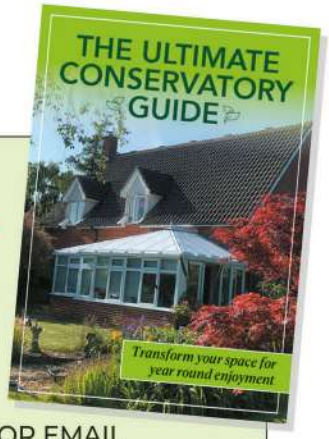
Anne Bird, Bristol



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SMARTWATCH | **£219** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57033

Apple Watch SE3

Wrist assured

The Apple Watch SE3 gives you the essentials of Apple's smartwatch range with fewer compromises than previous versions, thanks to an always-on screen and a faster S10 processor. The display only updates once a minute while inactive, but you can now see the time without having to lift your wrist.

The processor upgrade is an even bigger bonus. Apps open instantly, navigation is quick and wrist flick and double-tap gestures add a new layer of convenience. Though battery life is still rated at just 18 hours (or 36 in low-power mode) we found it usually lasted a full day with moderate use and can recharge from 0 to 80 per cent in less than 60 minutes.

5G now comes as an optional £70 upgrade and means you can take messages and calls, or use Siri, even when you're not connected to your smartphone.

Meanwhile, you get almost all the software upgrades from watchOS 26, including the new Notes app, where you can read or dictate iCloud notes, live message translations and the Workout Buddy AI fitness coach. You still have all the basics covered, including step count and automatic workout detection, plus improved sleep-monitoring features.

You don't get the advanced heart-rate sensor, high-blood-pressure alerts or ECG capabilities of the Watch Series 11, while the Watch SE3 has a smaller 40 or 44mm LTPO OLED screen that doesn't hold up quite as well in bright sunlight. Those wanting the larger 44mm model will also need to spend an extra £30. Still, why quibble? It's excellent value.

SPECIFICATIONS
1.5in or 1.7in LTPO OLED display • WR50 and IP7X water resistance • Bluetooth 5.3 • WiFi 4 • 18-hour battery life • 40x34x10.7mm/44x38x10.7mm (HxWxD) • 26g/32.9g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/57033

VERDICT With all the essential features you'll need and improved performance, this is Apple's best basic smartwatch to date

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Huawei WatchFit3 £110 Apple-style looks, a good range of core features and a 14-day battery life

BLUETOOTH SPEAKER | **£100** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57042

Pure Classic Aura

Party piece

This British-designed Bluetooth speaker comes with a hidden side. Out front, its wooden case and studded grille give it a retro Hi-Fi feel, but at the back a strip of multi-coloured ambient lighting provides 'party time' quirkiness. The eight LEDs in the rear-facing panel create a halo of coloured light on the wall behind, which can be set to remain static or to change dynamically with the beat of the music. Like an ageing dad hitting the dancefloor after a beer or two, it's eye-catching if not always quite on time.

You connect to the speaker via Bluetooth 5.3 or a 3.5mm audio jack line-in, and the built-in battery pack gives you 30 hours of playback from one charge. In practice, we found it lasted slightly less, but that was with the volume cranked up and the lighting turned on.

The Classic Aura is easy to use, with playback controls to the right of the top-mounted volume dial and three EQ presets and lighting controls on the left. The 40W speaker can confidently fill a room, projecting into every corner with lots of detail and a surprisingly good sense of space. The sound doesn't break up when playing heavier rock music at high volumes, even though the bass can feel slightly detached, like it's not quite coming from the same source.

This glowing music machine isn't perfect, but it'll definitely liven up a room or kick-start a party.

SPECIFICATIONS
40W total output • 30-hour battery life • Bluetooth 5.3 • 3.5mm line-in • USB-C for charging • 216x252x106mm (HxWxD) • 1.96kg www.snipca.com/57042

VERDICT The coloured lightshow adds quirky appeal to this great-sounding Bluetooth speaker

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE LG Xboom Grab £130 Superb speaker with 20-hour battery when volume is 50 per cent, and uses AI to fill a room with sound

SMART SCREEN | **£180** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57072

Amazon Echo Show 8

Go fourth

Amazon's fourth-generation Echo Show 8 could be the medium-sized smart screen you've been waiting for. Amazon has completely refreshed the design, and from its larger 8.7in display (up from 8in) to its 3D knitted fabric base, the new Show 8 looks and feels very different to its predecessors. The screen now appears to float above the spherical base, and has slimmer 7mm bezels on all four sides.

> "The larger screen makes it easier to enjoy photos and video calls"

The larger screen is also a very welcome edition, making it easier to interact with the Echo Show's features and enjoy your photos and video calls, even if you'll want the larger 11in version for streaming films and TV through your favourite apps. Only Amazon Prime Video is available on the Echo Show 8 right now.

If the screen has grown bigger, the rear of the unit has shrunk, yet it crams in the same powerful stereo speakers as the new Echo Studio smart speaker, along with a custom subwoofer that gives you twice the bass of the old model. This brings spatial audio to the Show 8, and is enough to make it a smart display you'll actually want to play music on.

It will also be one of the first devices with the new AI-enhanced Alexa+ when the technology launches in the UK, though no release date has yet been confirmed. At the moment, you're stuck with standard Alexa over here (and who knows for how long – see page 63).

The change of design has meant moving the volume and mute buttons from the top edge to the right side of the screen, but it's still easy to locate them by touch and they're always incredibly responsive. Meanwhile, Amazon's new AZ3 Pro processor makes navigating the interface faster and smoother than before, whatever is going on in the background.

The other big new feature is Omnisense – a temperature sensor combined with a presence-detection camera which makes the Show 8 even more useful as a Zigbee, Matter or Thread smart-home hub. You can still check camera feeds or manage your smart thermostats and lighting through Alexa or the touchscreen, but you can also use the sensors to activate routines. For example, you might have the Show 8 turn on the lighting when you enter a room and turn it off when you leave, or have an Alexa-compatible smart thermostat kick in whenever you're home and the temperature drops.

It's not all good news. There's no physical shutter on the camera, so you have to trust that pressing the mute button will disable mic and camera, though you can disable both in software via the Quick Settings menu. Meanwhile, the camera no longer takes casual snaps, and the fun Photo Booth feature of past Echo Show smart screens has gone. Both are relatively minor issues, and otherwise this is an upgrade in all the right ways.

SPECIFICATIONS

Amazon AZ3 Pro processor • 8.7in 1340x1480-pixel screen • 2.8in subwoofer • 2x full-range speakers • Wi-Fi 6E • 13-megapixel camera • Zigbee, Matter and Thread support • Room temperature sensor • Presence-detection camera • 150x210x130mm (HxWxD) • 1Kg www.snipca.com/57072

VERDICT A bigger screen, superb sound and some impressive new features make for a dazzling smart display

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Amazon Echo Show 21 £424 This 21in version can double as a compact Fire TV

DO I REALLY NEED...

A SteamOS gaming PC?

What is it?

Valve's new Steam Machine (www.snipca.com/57073, pictured) is a small, cube-shaped games PC, designed to do for big-screen gaming what the Steam Deck did for handheld consoles. Instead of running Windows, it runs Valve's version of Linux, called SteamOS.

What does it do?

Inside the tiny 152x156x163mm box sits the components of a gaming machine, with a custom six-core AMD Ryzen processor and Radeon graphics chip. It should run most PC games in your Steam collection at – Valve claims – 4K resolutions and 60fps using upscaling.

What's the catch?

It's not actually as powerful as the current Xbox Series X and PlayStation 5 consoles, and we don't yet know how much it'll cost.

So can I do without it?

Maybe. It's not a rival for serious gaming PCs, but it might attract new gamers.

NEXT ISSUE

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

MSI Prestige A16 AI+
£1,100 from www.snipca.com/55962
Tested Issue 718

A powerful Copilot+ laptop with 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD to guarantee fast performance. Screen is excellent too, while battery lasts an impressive 17 hours.

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion British-made laptop with superb screen and built for advanced AI tasks. £969 from www.snipca.com/55094

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £652 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

OnePlus Pad 3
£529 from www.snipca.com/55302
Tested Issue 714

With an incredibly fast processor and stunning 13.2in screen, this is the best ever Android tablet, and rivals the iPad Air. At launch both the 12GB RAM/256GB and 16GB/512GB versions were £529, so grab the latter as soon as possible.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £584 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£699 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £495 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

Samsung Galaxy A56
£493 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £460 from www.snipca.com/56073

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

Wired2Fire AMD R8845
£600 from www.snipca.com/56881
Tested Issue 723

Outstandingly fast machine, with 32GB DDR5 RAM and a 2TB SSD. You can easily add a second SSD by unscrewing the case. Has all the ports you need and measures just 53x135x127mm (HxWxD).

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K11 Speedy, powerful and easily upgradeable, with an OCuLink connection for graphics cards. £770 from www.snipca.com/54341

EBOOK READER

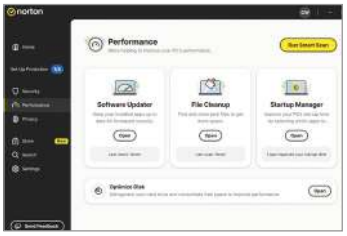
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £180 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£9.99 from www.snipca.com/56927
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, 15-month licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Obsbot Meet SE
£79 from www.snipca.com/54725
Tested Issue 710

The Meet SE from Chinese firm Obsbot beats the picture quality of our previous favourite, Logitech's C925e. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with terrific detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/56585

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£192 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£84 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £84; 2TB costs £174.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £80 from www.snipca.com/56926

COMPETITION

CAMBRIDGE

Win 1 of 3 Cambridge Audio Melomania A100 earbuds

Winner of a Recommend award in Issue 721 (page 28), Cambridge Audio's Melomania A100 earbuds capture every nuance of what you're listening to, making the audio sound pure and alive. They're powered by hi-fi-grade amplification and industry-leading tech, and support LDAC, aptX Lossless and LE Audio – delivering an expansive soundstage that brings every track to life.

Lightweight premium materials and a choice of silicone tip sizes ensure long-lasting comfort and an immersive fit. Thoughtfully crafted with 50-per-cent recycled plastics and reclaimed neodymium drivers.

The charging case has a battery life of 39 hours, while each earbud has up to 12 hours of playback on a single charge, with fast-charging for when you need more.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/56991 details by midnight Tuesday 16 December. Good luck!

You can buy Cambridge Audio Melomania A100 earbuds for £119 from Amazon (www.snipca.com/56546). For more information on Cambridge Audio products, including headphones, Hi-Fi systems and speakers, visit www.cambridgeaudio.com.

PRINTER

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£177 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £150 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Sharp GM6245K
Has a fantastic 43in screen with superb contrast, and 4K content looks especially detailed. Comes with TiVo for paid-for streaming and Freely for free live channels and catch-up. £230 from www.snipca.com/55940

ROUTER

PRICE DROP

TP-Link Archer BE550
£170 from www.snipca.com/55981
Tested Issue 718

This tri-band router is the first Wi-Fi 7 model to be our top choice. It had enough bandwidth across our test house to stream six 4K movies simultaneously, and has five 2.5Gbps Ethernet ports.

ALTERNATIVE Asus RT-AXE7800
Our previous favourite is also tri-band, but only on Wi-Fi 6E. That still delivers incredibly fast speeds that stretched deep into our test house. £180 from www.snipca.com/52957

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Pull Out & Keep

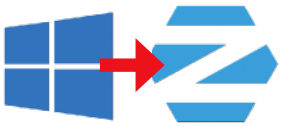
Issue 724

HOW TO...

Switch from Windows 10 to Zorin OS

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: External drive **Time required:** One hour (plus download time)



Windows 10 has entered its last year of mainstream support. By this time next year you'll need to have upgraded to Windows 11 or switched to an alternative if you want to be running a fully supported operating system. If your computer isn't capable of running Windows 11, try switching to a Linux distro – and, in particular, Zorin.

Zorin is based on Ubuntu, one of the most widely used Linux versions, and has been designed to resemble Windows. A paid-for version, Zorin OS Pro (£48 from www.snipca.com/57030), gives you 12 interfaces and advanced creative software, but the free edition is fine for most people. Version 18 of Zorin, released in October, adds more Windows tools (see box on page 37).

Before you start, make a complete backup of the computer on which you're going to install Zorin to make sure you can retrieve data if you need to.

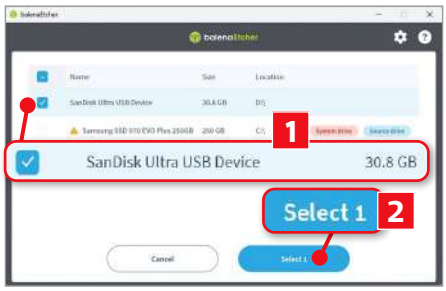
1 Download Zorin

Visit www.zorin.com and click download. Now scroll past Zorin OS 18 Pro, and click the download button below Zorin OS 18 Core. When it's finished downloading, visit www.snipca.com/56893 and click Download Etcher. The page will scroll to the download section – click the Download link to the right of 'Etcher for Windows' (it's at the top of the list). When the installer arrives, launch 'balenaEtcher-2.1.4.Setup.exe' from your Downloads folder. You'll use this to copy Zorin to your drive and set it up to boot your computer.

Plug a USB stick into your PC and back up anything you want to keep. Now click the blue 'Flash from File' button, navigate to your Downloads folder, then select 'Zorin-OS-18-Core-64-bit.iso' and click Open. Next, click 'Select target' and tick the box beside your USB stick (1 in our screenshot below). Double-check that you've selected the right drive here, as you don't want to accidentally overwrite important data on any internal drive or another external drive you've attached. When you're sure you've done so, click 'Select 1' 2.

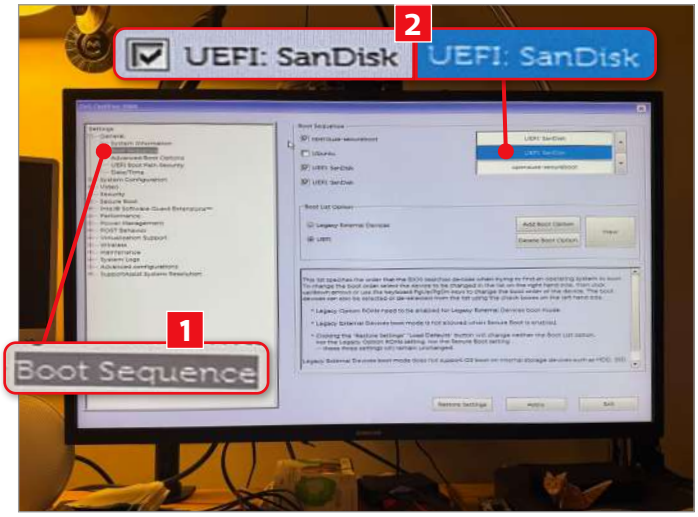
Finally, click Flash! 3 and Balena Etcher will start writing the files to your drive. Because this is a significant operation, Windows will pop up an alert asking if you're certain that you want to allow it to make changes to your device. Click Yes.

Wait until it's finished, then remove the stick from your PC and plug it into the computer on which you want to install Zorin. Leave it where it is if you want to install it on the PC you just used to copy the files.

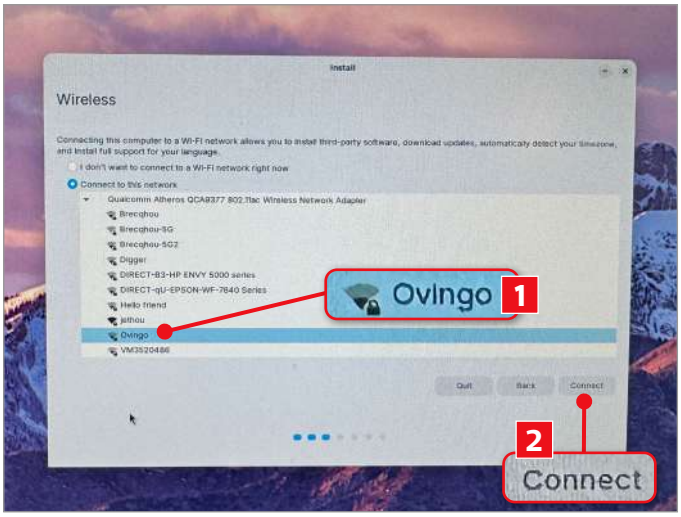


Double-check you've correctly selected the drive you want to use, then click 'Select 1'

When you click 'Flash!', Etcher will wipe your drive and set up the Zorin installer



Use the BIOS or UEFI screens to change the boot sequence order



Connect to your network to download updates while installing Zorin

2 Change your computer's boot order

Shut down the machine on which you're going to install Zorin, then restart while holding down the keys that will make it boot into BIOS or UEFI. The key combination for doing this varies between makes and model of computer, but it's sometimes displayed briefly when the machine boots. If your computer doesn't display this, check its manual or search online.

Once you've accessed the BIOS or UEFI, search through its screens for a boot order or boot-sequence setting (1 in our photo above) – again, the exact location and name of this setting varies. It lets you change the order in which the computer searches through connected drives when looking for something from which it can start up.

Usually it will check your hard drive or internal SSD first. If it finds nothing it can work with, it will look for an external drive. You want to change this so it checks the USB ports first 2 and only reverts to the hard drive or internal SSD if it doesn't find one. Save your settings and allow the computer to reboot. It should search for a bootable attached drive and, when it spots your USB stick, will launch Zorin OS.

3 Install Zorin

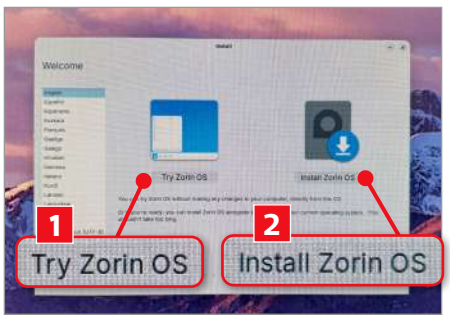
When Zorin starts, you'll be given two options: try it (1 in our screenshot right) or install it on your hard drive 2. Choose the former to check you like it before committing. At this point, you're using the operating system directly from the USB stick and Windows 10 will remain untouched on your hard drive. If you change your mind you can remove the stick, reboot your computer, and return to the operating system you're already familiar with. However, if you choose to install it right away, it will launch the standard Ubuntu-based Linux installer, which is easy to follow.

Start by choosing your keyboard layout. This will initially be set to English (US), so click English (UK) in the first column, then click Continue. On the next screen, select 'Connect to this network' followed by the name of your wireless network (1 in our screenshot above right). Click Connect 2 and Zorin will ask for the Wi-Fi password. Connecting to the internet at this stage will allow it to download updates later in the installation process. This isn't compulsory, though – you can connect once Zorin is up and running instead and download updates then.

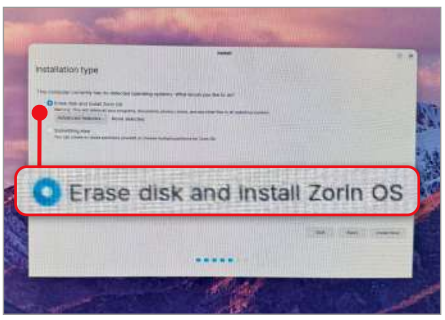
On the following box, titled 'Updates and other software', leave the option to 'Install third-party software for graphics and Wi-Fi hardware and additional media formats' selected. If you connected to your network in the previous step, we'd recommend also leaving 'Download updates while installing Zorin OS' selected. Click Continue.

We're wiping our internal hard drive and installing Zorin as the only operating system on our computer, so we've left 'Erase disk and install Zorin OS' selected (see our screenshot below). We'd recommend this in general if you're moving away from Windows 10. However, you can install Windows 10 and Zorin side by side if you think you'll ever revert to the former. Zorin should detect that the hard drive already contains a copy of Windows and offer to install Zorin beside it, so select this option if it appears on your computer.

Click 'Install Now' and Zorin will summarise what it's going to do to your internal boot drive. If you're happy to proceed, click Continue. Select your timezone in the next box, then enter your name, a name for your computer, a username and a password. This is the last stage of the setup process. Up to this point, no changes should have been made to your hard drive and you can still back out. However, if you want to commit to Zorin, click Continue one last time and it will get to work.



You can try Zorin from the USB stick before you commit to installing it



Choose this option if you're installing Zorin as the only operating system on your computer

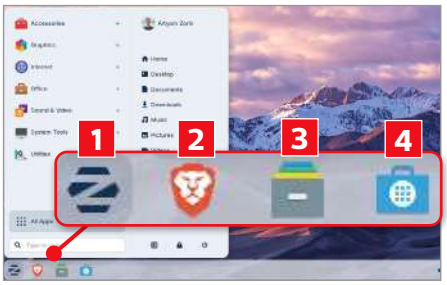
The installation process took around 10 minutes on our Dell OptiPlex mini PC, which we bought second-hand and is about eight years old. When the installation routine has completed, click Restart Now and the installer will shut down. Remove your USB stick when instructed to do so, then press Enter. Because your computer won't detect an external device this time, it will reboot from the internal drive and drop you into Zorin, rather than Windows.

4 Start using Zorin

The interface should be fairly familiar. Clicking the Z logo (1 in our screenshot below) at the bottom left opens Zorin's equivalent of Windows' Start menu. The default browser is Brave 2, while to the right is Zorin's equivalent of Windows' File Explorer 3. The blue briefcase icon is the software installer 4.

Start by clicking the Z and hover over the Office category. On the menu you'll see options for various LibreOffice programs. You'll find Rhythmbox in the 'Sound & Video' menu, which you can use for playing music, and there's a plain-text editor in the Accessories menu.

What you'll not find in these default menus is an email program. So, click the grid of nine dots at the bottom of the menu to open All Apps, then click Evolution. This is Zorin's email and calendar program. When you first launch it, it will open the Welcome box. Click Next to read the instructions and connect to your email account.



Click the Z logo to open Zorin's Start menu, and other icons for Brave and more

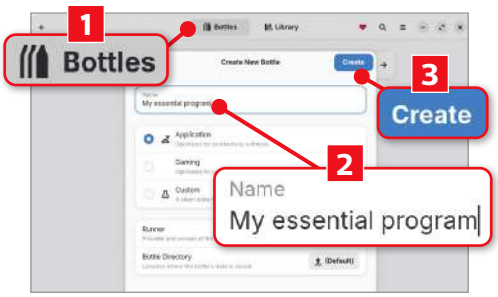
Before settling on the interface, check alternative desktop layouts and themes in the Zorin Appearance program on the main menu (see our screenshot above).

5 Run Windows software inside Zorin

If you absolutely can't do without certain Windows programs, you might be able to run them inside Zorin using the Wine tool (though it's not guaranteed). To install it, open the main menu and click System Tools followed by Windows App Support. Click 'Install' in the box that opens (see our screenshot above) and enter your password.

When it's installed you'll see a new Windows Apps menu at the bottom of the main menu. Open this and launch Bottles. Follow the instructions and, when it's done, switch to the Bottles tab (1 in our screenshot below) and click Create New Bottle. A bottle is a container for the program you want to run.

Give the bottle a name 2 and click Create 3. Bottles will now set up the environment for the program. Once it's done, click the button showing two cogs and navigate to the program you want to launch. If you don't have the program file already, click the arrow instead and click 'Install Programs...' to open a list of programs compiled by community users.



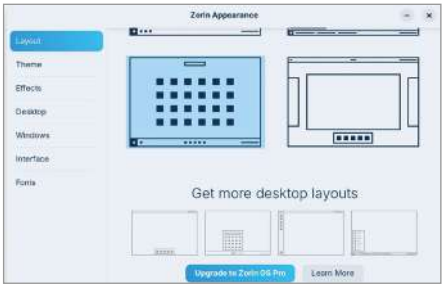
Give your Wine bottle a name then click Create

How I use Linux

I use Linux a lot. I find it a pleasant environment for writing, although I do switch to macOS for a lot of graphical work as the programs that I rely on for those jobs don't have Linux equivalents. I've switched between different Linux versions over the years but have most recently been using OpenSUSE Tumbleweed (www.snipca.com/57029).

Nik Rawlinson

How do you use Linux?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

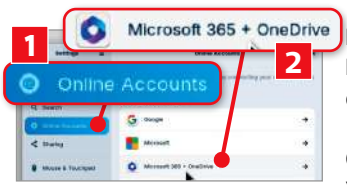


The Zorin Appearance program lets you change the desktop layout

Install Wine if you want to run Windows programs in Zorin

WHAT'S NEW IN ZORIN OS 18

WINDOW TILING
This is Zorin's equivalent of snap layouts in Windows. Drag a window to the top of your screen and drop it into one of the layouts that appears.



WEB APPS
Zorin 18 adds support for progressive web apps (PWAs), letting you turn certain websites – such as Google Docs, Microsoft 365 or Adobe Photoshop – into a desktop program.

ONEDRIVE INTEGRATION
You can now access your OneDrive files from Zorin. Open Settings then click Online Accounts (1 in our screenshot) followed by 'Microsoft 365 + OneDrive' 2 and sign in.

Visit www.snipca.com/57031 to see what else is new.

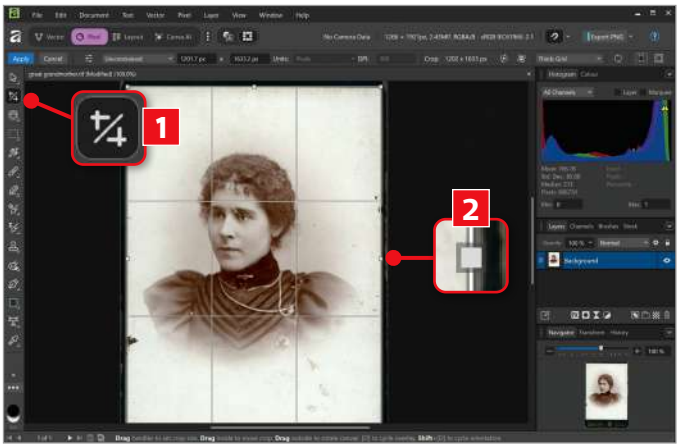
Restore damaged photos for free with Affinity Photo

What you need: Affinity 3.0, Windows 10 or 11
Time required: 40 minutes

Until recently, Affinity Photo image editor was the best Photoshop alternative for anyone wanting to avoid Adobe's pricey subscription, but its £60 one-off fee still put many people off. Now, with the release of version 3.0, the entire Affinity creative suite is available for free. Alongside Affinity Photo, you get professional-level tools for vector illustration and desktop publishing. In fact, the only paid-for extras are AI-powered editing tools, which you can easily do without. In this Workshop, we'll explain how to use Affinity Photo to repair and restore damaged photos.

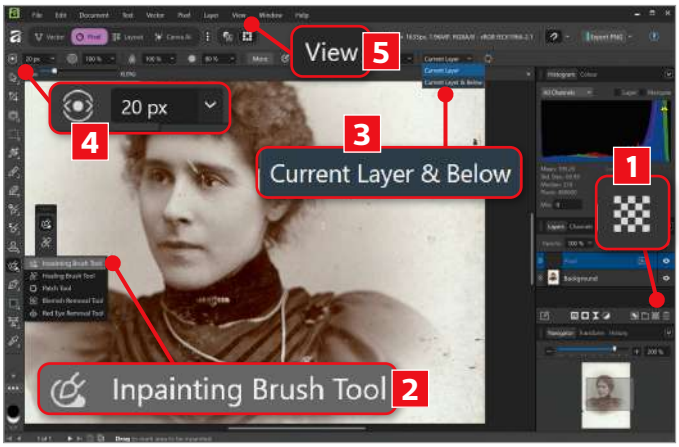
STEP 1

Go to www.snipca.com/57002, click 'Download for Windows' 1 and select 'MSI/EXE (x64)' 2 (unless your PC has an ARM processor, in which case click 'MSI/EXE ARM64' 3). Follow the installation prompts then open Affinity and click the 'Log in or sign up' button. This will take you to a login screen in your browser. If you already have a free Canva account, you can sign in with that. If not, follow the steps to set up a new account and log in. When Affinity suite opens for the first time, you'll see an introductory video, which you can watch or skip.



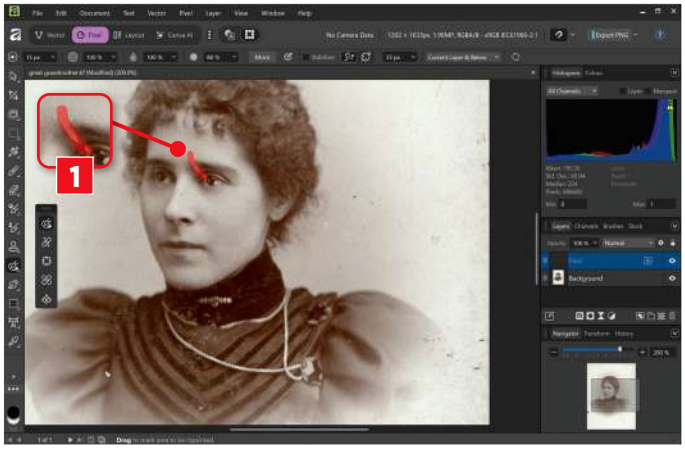
STEP 2

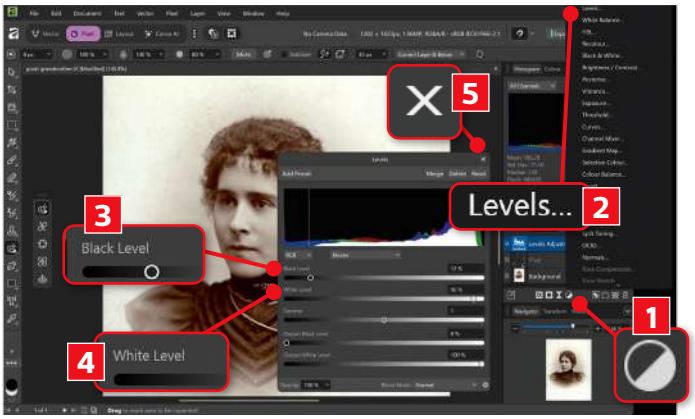
Scan in your damaged photo – refer to your printer/scanner's instructions to find out how to do this – and save it to your hard drive. Open the scan in Affinity (click File top left, then Open, navigate to the folder where you saved your scanned image file, select it and click Open). It will open in the Photo tab with all the tools you need. In our case, there's a lot of damage around the edges of the photo. The easiest way to deal with this is to crop out the edges. Click the Crop tool 1, and you'll see a grid appear over your image. Drag the edges of the grid 2 inwards, so that the damaged areas are out of the frame, then press Enter on your keyboard.



STEP 3

To repair scratches and other damage in the main part of the image, click the Pixel Layer button 1, then click the Inpainting Brush Tool 2. Click where it says Current Layer in the top toolbar and select 'Current Layer & Below' 3. The procedure works best if you click the Width option 4 and use the slider to reduce the width of the Inpainting Brush Tool to roughly the width of the scratches you want to repair. You might also need to zoom into the area you want to repair (Click View 5, Zoom, then In).



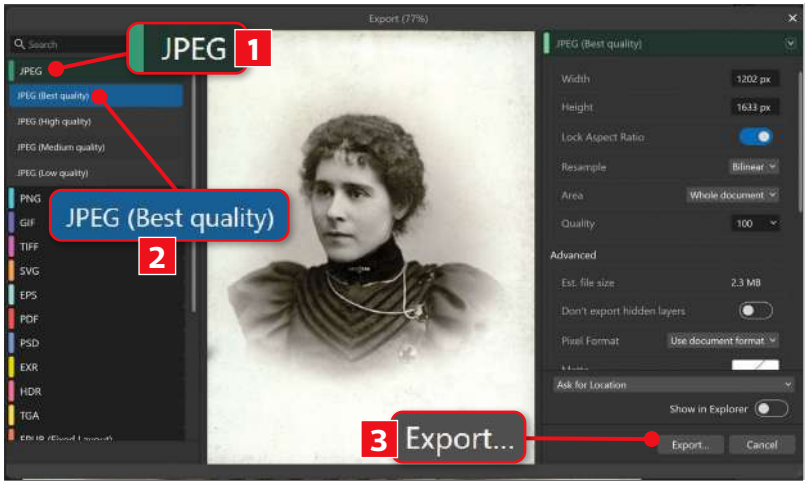


STEP 4 Work your way around the image, clicking and dragging the brush over any scratches – you'll see a red line when you do this 1. When you release the mouse button, each scratch should disappear. Smaller marks may need to be clicked just once. The process can take a while, depending on how scratched your image is. The brush doesn't always get it right; if you produce a strange effect or a smudge, press Ctrl+Z to undo your last brush stroke, then try changing the brush width again, or dragging the brush from a different angle.

STEP 5 Once you've removed all the scratches, you can fix the lighting – this is particularly useful if your photo is faded. Click the Adjustments button 1 and select Levels 2. In the Levels window. Click the Black Level slider 3 and drag it to the right until the line meets the beginning of the white area of the graph. Click the White Level slider 4 and drag it to the left until the line meets the end of the white graph. Experiment further with the levels yourself until the image starts to look correct. Click X 5 to close the Levels window.

STEP 6 Some old photos can suffer from an unnatural colour cast. You can fix this with the Adjustments button 1 and selecting HSL 2 (which stands for hue, saturation and luminosity). If your image has a reddish cast, for example, click the red circle 3 in the HSL window to select the red colour range, then use the Hue Shift, Saturation Shift and Luminosity Shift sliders below 4 to adjust the colours, tones and brightness levels so they look more natural. Click X 5 to close the HSL window when you've finished.

STEP 7 It's a good idea to save your repaired photo as a new Affinity file (with all your current edits saved), so that you can open and re-edit it again later if needed. Click File, Save As, type a file name, leave 'Save as type' set to Affinity Files and click Save. If you want to share your repaired photo with others, you'll need to export it as a JPEG. Click File, Export and select the JPEG option on the left 1 then Select 'JPEG (best quality)' 2. Leave all the other settings as they are, then click Export 3, type a name for your file and click Save.



Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

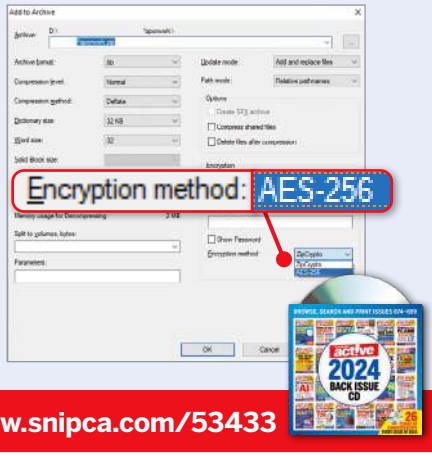
Create an encrypted drive on your PC

I'm one of the people you referenced in Issue 723's feature on running a Windows 10 PC safely online (page 60). I refuse to dump my PC just because it can't be upgraded to Windows 11, so will continue to use it – for basic tasks and web browsing.

I had already taken some of the precautions you advised. In fact, I've gone even further by creating an encrypted folder on my PC to store sensitive documents. It means no one will be able to see them even if they gain access to my PC.

I do this by using the free compression tool 7-Zip (www.snipca.com/54175). I select AES-256 in the 'Encryption method' dropdown menu (see screenshot) and keep the password somewhere safe. I've read that it would take a modern computer longer than the age of the universe to crack AES-256, which is about as safe you can get!

Howard Turner



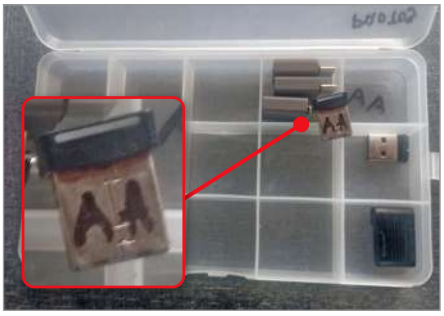
Howard wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433

PHYSICAL STORAGE

Store small USB sticks in craft boxes

I've just started transferring MP3 files to small USB sticks to use in the appropriate socket in my Bluetooth speaker. But storage as usual with such a small bit of kit is a problem. My solution is to use small craft boxes with 3x3cm compartments – 15 per box. They cost £6.99 each from Amazon (www.snipca.com/57016).



As my photo (below left) shows I've marked the sticks AA and the bottom of the compartment with the same initials. This is my first box, hence the first A and the second A for the individual item.

Chris Adam

TV

Watch old recordings on Virgin TiVo box

Like Alan Thomas (Issue 720, page 69), I was also pressured by Virgin to upgrade to their TV 360 box on an 18-month contract. It doesn't match the TiVo (pictured above right), though on the plus side it's physically much smaller and accepts voice commands, which work well.

Before disposing of my old TiVo, which was full of recordings, I plugged it into the HDMI 2 port on my TV. I could still play and watch all the recordings, though nothing else worked. I thought this might help Alan if it's not too late.

Mike Lillis

SOFTWARE

Rename files using Bulk Rename Utility

I've been a reader for many years and seen several recommendations for file renamers, but I've not noticed you

Why I stopped using...

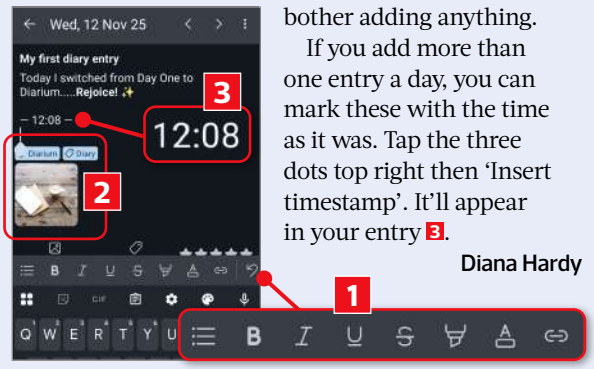
Day One

Like Jonathan Parkyn (Issue 723, page 63) I also stopped using the Day One app (https://dayoneapp.com) for jotting down my thoughts. With prices still going up I realised it was crazy to pay £50 for features I don't need, like syncing across multiple devices.

And what I use instead...

But unlike Jonathan, I don't have an iPhone. All my jotting is done on a Samsung phone running Android. So when I ditched Day One last month I switched to **Diarium** (www.snipca.com/57026), which works superbly on Android. Just tap a date in the calendar layout and start writing.

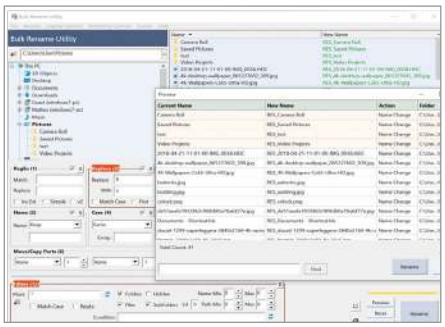
There are standard formatting options below (1 in our screenshot), and you can add files, tags and photos 2 – though this is limited in the free version. I'm happy keeping it simple, so don't bother adding anything.



If you add more than one entry a day, you can mark these with the time as it was. Tap the three dots top right then 'Insert timestamp'. It'll appear in your entry 3.

Diana Hardy

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk



mentioning Bulk Rename Utility (www.snipca.com/57022, pictured above). It's a bit of a steep learning curve, but it provides many ways to rename any number of files in one go. You can add or remove the first or last X number of characters, or insert or remove a specific character or characters within the file name. You can also insert or remove spaces anywhere along the file name.

It's very helpful if you have music, video or image collections that need managing. I've used it for many years and will continue to do so.

Stefan Kuc

Reader recommends...

Acemagic 18.5in Full HD laptop

£600 from www.snipca.com/57018

In Issue 722 (page 26) Evelyn Reid asked for a laptop with a 16in or 17in screen. You recommended the Acer Swift AI 16, which costs £1,299 from Currys (www.snipca.com/56744). That meets Evelyn's £1,500 budget, but I'd like to recommend an alternative made by Acemagic. It has an even bigger screen (18.5in) but has an RRP of only £600 – though recently it was on sale on Amazon for £399.

I wear glasses, so I was looking for a big screen to help me see clearly. It's Full HD (1920x1080 pixels), and also has an Intel N150 3.6GHz processor, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD, Bluetooth 5.0, three USB 3.2 ports and Wi-Fi 5.

It meets my everyday needs. I'm pleased with the purchase and think it's good value. It can also be upgraded to add more storage and memory.

Anthony Martin

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

STREAMING

Download videos to Google Drive to watch on TV

A couple of years ago, I was deciding whether to buy a new SanDisk 2TB SSD. I already had two 1TB backup drives, but both were getting full. Instead, I chose to upgrade my Google Drive storage to 2TB for £7.99 a month (www.snipca.com/57020). This gave me greater peace of mind with the added benefit of offsite backup and security. I now back up all my files to both my USB drives and Google Drive.

After purchasing an Amazon Fire TV Stick, I discovered an app called 'Gfolio for Google Drive Photos' (www.snipca.com/57019, pictured below), which works perfectly on my Panasonic 4K TV. Thanks to Stacher (https://stacher.io), as recommended by *Computeractive* earlier this year, I can now download YouTube or BBC videos in Full HD (or even higher) and upload directly to my Google Drive then watch on my TV. I can also view all my photos, though unfortunately, it doesn't yet support audio files.

The streaming and picture quality are excellent, and it feels just like having my own private YouTube channel.

John Ryan

HARDWARE

Use timer to turn printer off

I have an HP DeskJet 4100 printer that suits my needs. But at least once a week it shows a Wi-Fi connection error and all its lights start flashing like a Christmas tree (pictured below). It resets when I press the power button and then works fine. However, I use HP's Instant Ink (www.snipca.com/57017) which sends you new ink cartridges when you run low.

I'm happy with this, but when I go on holiday and the printer develops its connection error, I'm not there to fix it. HP then sends me emails saying I'm in breach of their terms and conditions, and the printer will stop working. I assume it thinks you're printing offline to circumvent your plan.

My solution is to plug the printer into an old-fashioned analogue timer that turns it off and then back on once a day. This clearly works as recently I returned from two weeks away and the printer was fine, but in the week since I've had to reset the printer twice.

Chris Binns

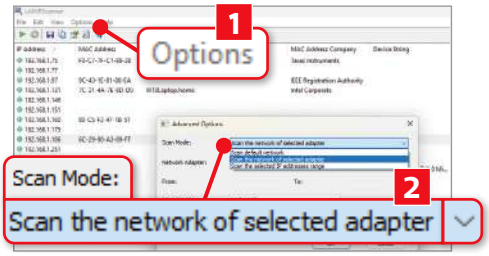
WI-FI

Change network adapter being scanned

NirSoft's LANIPscanner (www.snipca.com/56719) is great at quickly listing everything on your home network (Issue 722, page 46). One handy tip is to change the network adapter being scanned, if you have more than one at home or work.

First click Options (1 in our screenshot below), then Advanced Options (or press F9). Now click the Scan Mode dropdown menu and select 'Scan the network of selected adapter' 2 followed by the adapter you want to scan in the 'Network Adapter' menu. Click OK to confirm.

Pete Coleman



Secret settings and the best extensions

FIREFOX

Search with Perplexity, chat with Copilot

Mozilla is continuing to expand Firefox's AI features, in a less intrusive way than in Edge and Brave. It has added the AI-powered 'answer engine' Perplexity to its choice of search providers, so you can get detailed and reliable responses to your queries.

To search with Perplexity, select that option in the 'This time search with' dropdown menu to the left of the browser's address bar (1 in our screenshot below). Type a query and press Enter – or click an autocomplete suggestion – to load the Perplexity website and read its answer.

Firefox also now includes Microsoft's Copilot in its choice of chatbots. Click the 'Open AI chatbot' button in the sidebar (click 'Show sidebar' if you don't see this) and set Copilot as your default AI assistant 2. Other options include ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini.

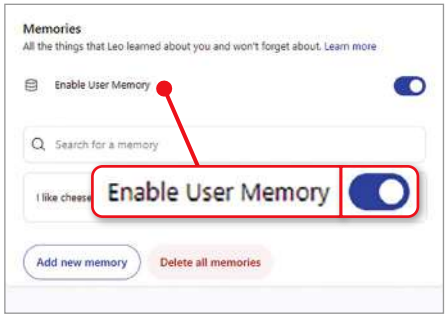
BRAVE

Make Leo friendlier to talk to

Brave has updated its built-in chatbot, Leo, with a 'memory' feature. This personalises your AI experience and makes Leo friendlier to talk to than its default, rather formal demeanour.

Click the Settings icon in the top-right corner of a Leo chat window and choose 'Manage memories'. Tell Leo a few things about yourself, such as your name, interests and the tone you want it to adopt, then click 'Save changes'.

Ensure 'Enable User Memory' is switched on (see screenshot below left) and add further details you want Leo to remember. Brave says memory data is stored privately on your computer and isn't shared beyond the browser. Click 'Delete all memories' to start afresh.


Memories
All the things that Leo learned about you and won't forget about. Learn more
Enable User Memory
Search for a memory
Enable User Memory
Add new memory
Delete all memories

CHROME

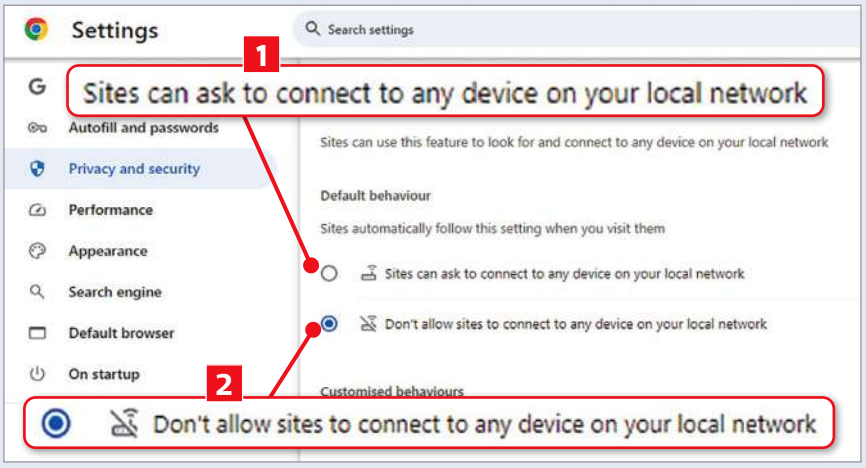
Stop websites accessing your home network

Chrome 142, released at the end of October, added a new security setting to better protect your home network from hackers. It requires websites to ask for permission to access devices on your network, or you can block them by default.

There are legitimate reasons for some local-network requests, such as casting videos to your smart TV or backing up files to a NAS drive. But Google says the new permission "mitigates the risk of cross-site request forgery attacks" against your router and other devices, and also helps prevent fingerprinting.

To access the new permission, type chrome://settings/content/localNetworkAccess in Chrome's address bar and press Enter – copy this from our Pastebin account at www.snipca.com/56922.

The default setting is 'Sites can ask to connect to any device on your local network' (1 in our screenshot below) – click Allow or Block when they ask. To block all requests, select 'Don't allow sites to connect to any device on your local network' 2.


Settings
Search settings
1
Sites can ask to connect to any device on your local network
Autofill and passwords
Privacy and security
Performance
Appearance
Search engine
Default browser
On startup
Sites can use this feature to look for and connect to any device on your local network
Default behaviour
Sites automatically follow this setting when you visit them
Sites can ask to connect to any device on your local network
Don't allow sites to connect to any device on your local network
2
Customised behaviours
Don't allow sites to connect to any device on your local network

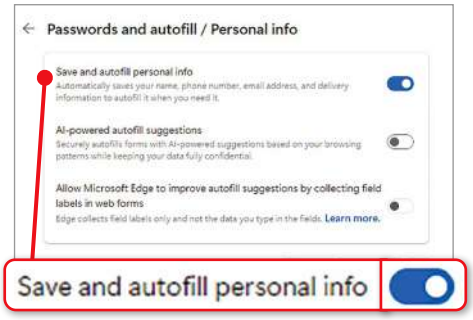
EDGE

Autofill your address in online forms

Edge 142 (released in November) improves its autofill feature when you enter your address in online forms. The browser will now prompt you to save the address, so it can be used for future autofill suggestions.

Previously, Edge either saved all addresses automatically or didn't save any. Microsoft says the change will ensure autofill data is saved intentionally and reduce the number of unwanted addresses stored in the browser.

To enable the feature, click Edge's three-dot menu button and choose Settings, then 'Passwords and autofill'. Select 'Personal info' and switch on 'Save and autofill personal info' (see screenshot above).

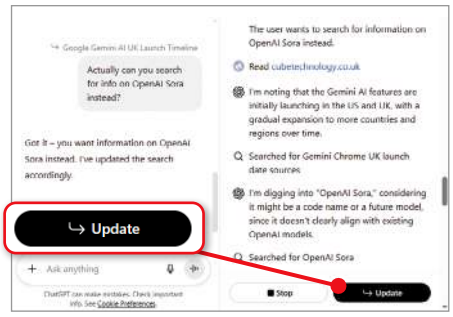

Passwords and autofill / Personal info
Save and autofill personal info
AI-powered autofill suggestions
Allow Microsoft Edge to improve autofill suggestions by collecting field labels in web forms
Learn more.
Save and autofill personal info

CHATGPT

Interrupt responses with new information

You can now interrupt ChatGPT to provide new or different information for your query, when it's taking a long time to respond. This is handy when using its 'Deep research' option, which scours more sources to generate in-depth and 'reasoned' answers.

Rather than wait a few minutes for the chatbot's response, then enter a follow-up question, you can click or tap Update (see screenshot below) to supply the new detail. ChatGPT will refine its research and answer based on your new requirements, without losing its current progress. Click or tap Stop instead, if you want to abandon the query and ask ChatGPT something else.



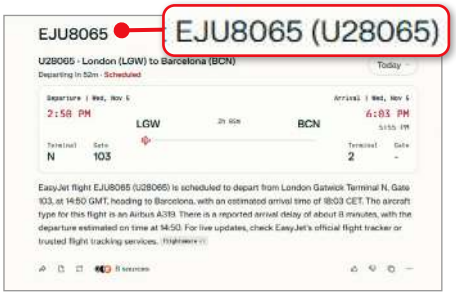
PERPLEXITY

View live flight information

Perplexity has added real-time flight tracking, allowing you to check the status of your flight without visiting the airline or airport website. Its information includes the departure and arrival times, terminal and gate number, flight duration and details of delays.

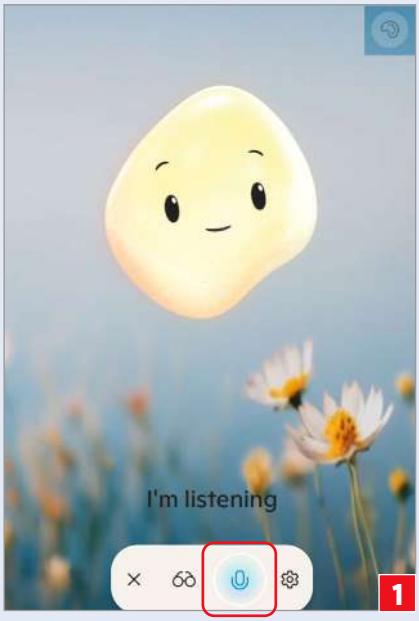
To try this new feature, simply enter a flight number (see screenshot below) in the search box and press Enter. Perplexity will then display an infographic and provide a flight summary, combining live data from sources such as FlightAware and Flightradar24.

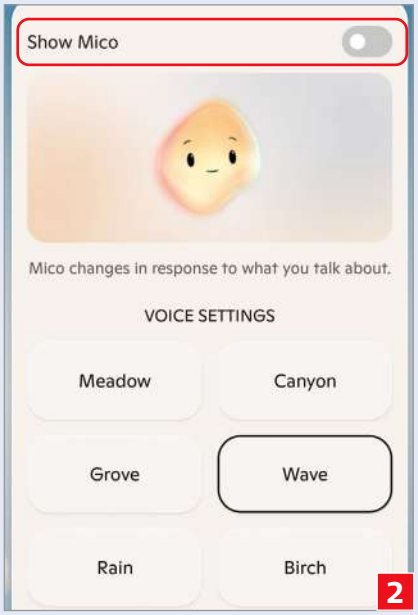
You can view information for flights departing in the next three days. We found the live-status feature works best with flights from major international airports. With regional airports, Perplexity sometimes refers you to the relevant sites.



COPILOT

Put a friendly face on your chats





Microsoft has created an animated character to represent Copilot. It's called Mico and is intended to make voice chats with the AI assistant "friendly and engaging".

This floating yellow blob listens, reacts and even changes colour to reflect your interactions, though it doesn't actually 'speak' Copilot's responses. Mico is now enabled by default when you switch to Voice mode (see screenshot 1) on the Copilot website and in its apps for Android, iOS and Windows 11.

You can customise Mico's appearance by clicking or tapping the palette icon in the top-right corner. If you'd prefer not to see the friendly blob, click or tap the 'Voice settings' cog and switch off the Show Mico option (screenshot 2) .

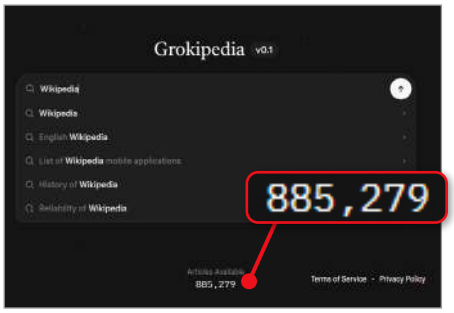
Mico may remind you of Microsoft's old Office assistant Clippy, and the resemblance is intentional. Keep clicking or tapping the blob and it will turn into the animated paper clip.

GROK

Browse the Grok version of Wikipedia

Elon Musk has launched Grokipedia (www.grokipedia.com) to provide a "truthful and independent alternative" to Wikipedia. Rather than being edited and moderated by volunteers, articles in this new online encyclopedia are generated and fact-checked by Grok, which Musk claims gives them greater breadth, depth and accuracy.

Grokipedia's streamlined design makes it speedy to browse and clicking a citation takes you directly to the source web page, rather than a References section. But it currently only has around 885,000 English-language articles (see screenshot above) compared with Wikipedia's seven million, and much of its content is sourced from that site. Musk says the next update will make Grokipedia "10 times better".



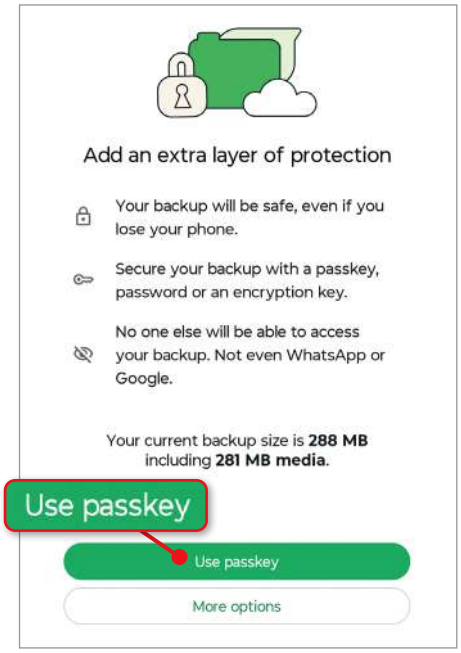
Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Encrypt WhatsApp backups with a passkey

WhatsApp has long offered the option to protect your account with a passkey. This allows you to verify your identity using your fingerprint, face or other screen-lock method when you log into your WhatsApp account on another device – such as when using WhatsApp Web in your desktop browser.

It has now added passkey support to its end-to-end encrypted backups of your WhatsApp chats. The existing options let you secure these backups with a password or automatically generated 64-digit encryption key. If you forget or lose either of those, you won't be able to restore your encrypted backups.


Add an extra layer of protection
Your backup will be safe, even if you lose your phone.
Secure your backup with a passkey, password or an encryption key.
No one else will be able to access your backup. Not even WhatsApp or Google.
Your current backup size is 288 MB including 281 MB media.
Use passkey
Use passkey
More options

The new passkey method is more convenient and prevents you from being locked out of your backups. It's particularly useful when setting up WhatsApp on a new phone, because you can use the passkey to verify it's you and quickly transfer your chats.

To set up the feature, tap your profile icon and choose Chats, then 'Chat backup'. Select 'End-to-end encrypted backup' and tap 'Use passkey' (see screenshot below left).

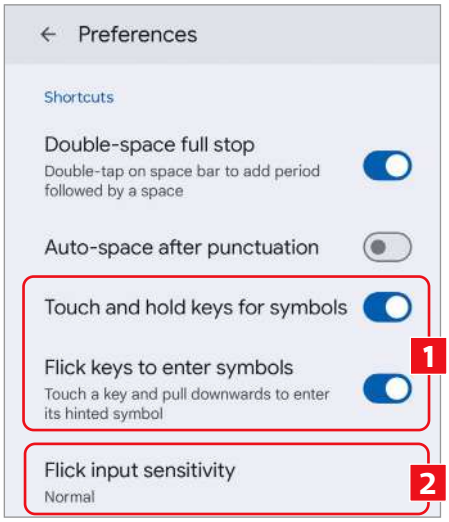
If you have a WhatsApp passkey saved in your device's password manager, it will be automatically applied. If not, tap 'Replace passkey' then 'Create passkey'. Use your screen-lock method to confirm and tap Create to create your end-to-end encrypted backup.

ANDROID

Enter symbols by flicking Gboard keys

Google has added an interesting feature to its Gboard keyboard app (www.snipca.com/56946) that makes it easier to type symbols. To enter punctuation marks, mathematical symbols and currency symbols, you usually have to press the '?123' key to switch Gboard to its symbols layout.

With the new option, you simply 'flick' a letter key to enter its corresponding symbol, such as A to produce an '@' or D to generate a '£'. It takes a little getting used to, and is technically a small swipe rather than a flick, but can save you time and surplus key taps.



To activate the feature, tap the Settings cog at the top of the Gboard keyboard (tap the four-square icon if you can't see this) and choose Preferences. Switch on the options 'Touch and hold keys for symbols' and 'Flick keys to enter symbols' (1 in our screenshot above). You can also adjust the 'Flick input sensitivity' 2.

When you return to the keyboard, you'll see symbols in the top-right corner of each letter key. Gently swipe down on the key – taking care not to touch surrounding keys – to enter the symbol in whatever you're typing.

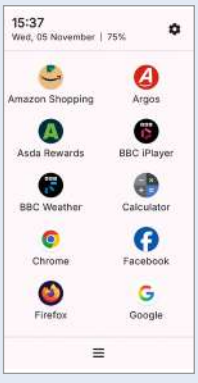
BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Senior Launcher

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/56941

Senior Launcher makes your phone or tablet easier to use by removing clutter and enlarging icons. Add your favourite apps and (optionally) contacts, and keep the rest hidden until required. You can customise the layout, switch to dark mode and show the time and battery status. The full version costs £4.99 after a seven-day free trial.

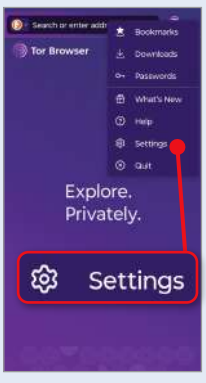


Tor Browser

Free

Android www.snipca.com/56928

Tor Browser has been updated to let you lock your private tabs using your phone's screen lock. Go to Settings (see screenshot) then Tabs and enable the new option 'Use screen lock to hide Tor Browser tabs'. When you return to the browser after switching to another app or your home screen, use your fingerprint, face or PIN to unlock your tabs.



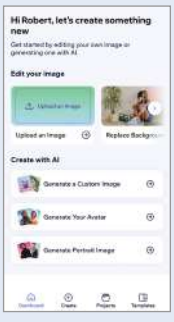
Wixel

Free*

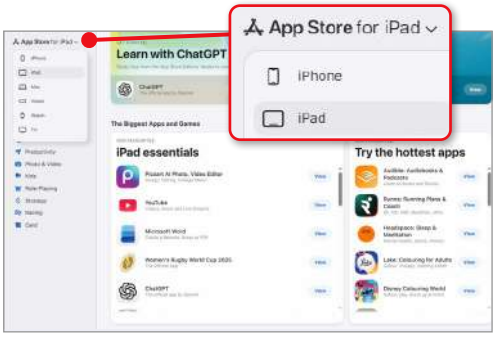
Android www.snipca.com/56935

iOS www.snipca.com/56936

This new app from the company behind website builder Wix lets you create and edit images using AI. Describe the pictures you want to create, or upload existing images, and choose from a variety of styles, sizes, angles and camera types. Wixel also offers templates such as invitations and greeting cards, and gives you 10 free credits.



*Contains in-app purchases



iOS

Explore the redesigned Apple App Store

As we mentioned in our News section in Issue 723 (page 8), Apple has redesigned the web-based version of its App Store to make it much easier to find apps of interest. The revamp brings the website closer in line with the App Store on your iPhone or iPad, with a similar look to Apple's old iTunes software.

The former App Store site only showed individual pages for apps, with no search function or category list to find more. The most common way to access these pages was through Google or another search engine, or our own Snipca links.

The redesigned store has a proper homepage (www.snipca.com/56938) that highlights the latest and most popular iOS apps and games. Browse by category such as 'Photo & Video', 'Health & Fitness' and Entertainment, and click the dropdown menu in the top-left corner (see screenshot above) to switch between iPhone and iPad apps (as well as Mac, Apple Watch and TV).

The new search tool helps you find specific apps in seconds, and app pages present information more clearly. However, unlike the Google Play Store, you still can't install apps to your mobile device through the Apple App Store website, and must instead use its app on your iPhone or iPad.

iOS

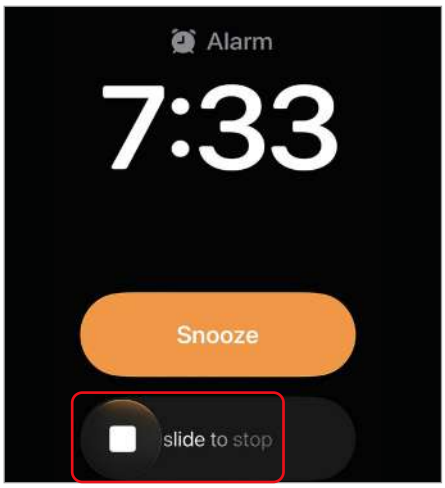
Make it harder to ignore an alarm

Two months after the release of iPhone and iPadOS 26, Apple has updated its mobile operating system to version 26.1. Although this isn't a major upgrade, it makes an interesting change to the alarm feature in the Clock app.

Previously, when an alarm sounded at the scheduled time, you could turn it off with a single tap. Although this stopped a loud noise emanating from your iPhone or iPad, it also risked you falling asleep again and missing the appointment or other important event you'd set the alarm for.

The updated feature requires you to slide your finger across the Stop button to turn off the alarm (see screenshot right). The concentration involved in this action should help you wake up.

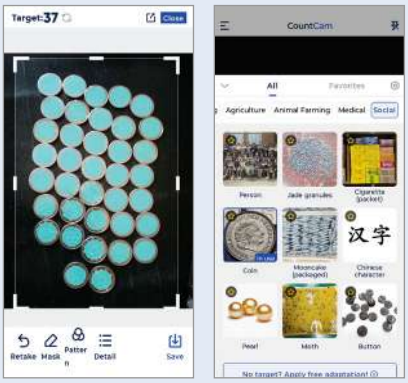
The Snooze option on the Alarm screen can still be activated with a tap, for times when you want an extra few minutes in bed. To restore the original Stop button, open the Settings app, tap Accessibility then Touch, and switch on Prefer Single-Touch Action.



BEST APPS FOR... Counting things

CountCam

Free
Android www.snipca.com/56971
iOS www.snipca.com/56949
CountCam uses AI to count the number of objects in photos you take or import. Although some of its presets are for industrial use (such as tubes, magnets and timber), it can also count coins, buttons, pills and even people (under Social). You sometimes have to select objects manually, but unlike rival apps it's completely free
Best For Counting things in photos

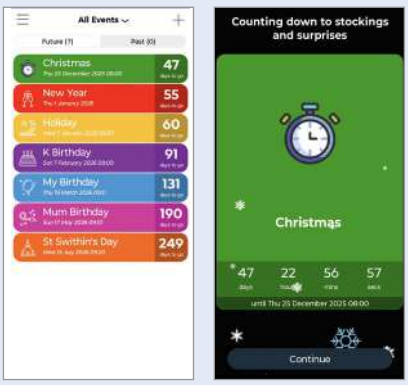


Tally Counter

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/56953
This app helps you keep a tally of anything, from the number of cups of tea you've drunk to scores in a game, visitors at an event or exercises performed. Add as many counters as you want, customise their names and colours, and tap their plus buttons to increase their counts. For iOS, try the similar Counter Tally Count (www.snipca.com/56952).
Best For Counting real-world items

Countdown: Event Countdown

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/56957
iOS www.snipca.com/56958
Count down the days to important events using this simple app. Assign different colours and icons to each event, set up reminders, share the details with other people and view the hours, minutes and seconds ticking away. Upgrade to Premium for £2.39 a month or £9.99 a year to remove ads, create widgets and unlock extra features.
Best For: Counting days until events



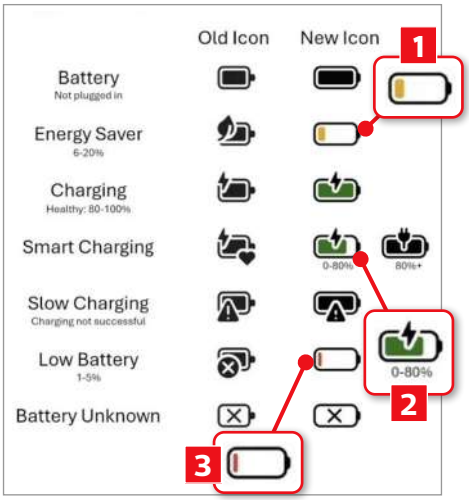
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 11 INSIDER

Learn new coloured battery icons

Microsoft is adding coloured battery icons to Windows 11's taskbar. When it's in Energy Saver mode (six to 20 per cent) the icon will be yellow (1 in our screenshot below), while charging above that – including Smart Charging – is green 2. Battery level below five per cent is indicated by a red icon 3.

The icons began to be rolled out to Windows Insiders in November, and should be added to the full version some time next year.



Credit: Windows Latest

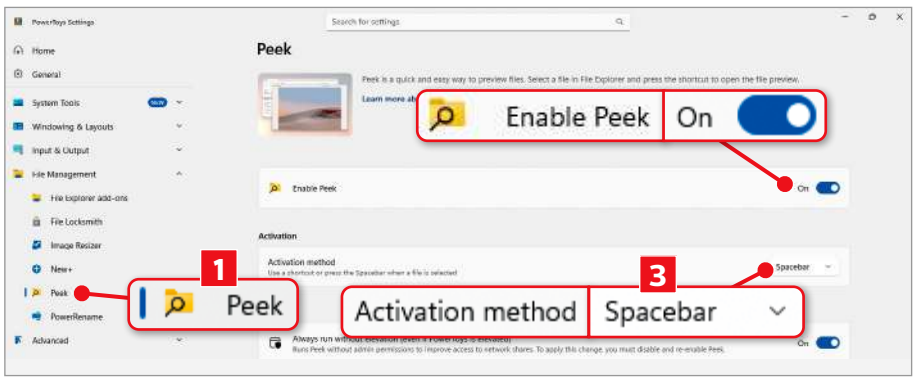
WINDOWS 10 & 11

See preview of files by pressing the space bar

Version 0.95 of PowerToys, released in October, makes it easier to open the Peek tool. This lets you quickly preview the content of a file – such as a photo or document – without opening the required program, such as Windows Photos or Word. To do this previously you had to set a keyboard shortcut for Peek. Now you only need to press the space bar.

First though you need to turn Peek on. Launch PowerToys then click File Management on the left followed by Peek in the left-hand menu (1 in our screenshot below). Now turn on the 'Enable Peek' slider 2 and check that Spacebar is selected below 3.

If you already have PowerToys installed, you'll be prompted to update to version 0.95 when you next open it. If you don't have it installed, download it from www.snipca.com/56718.

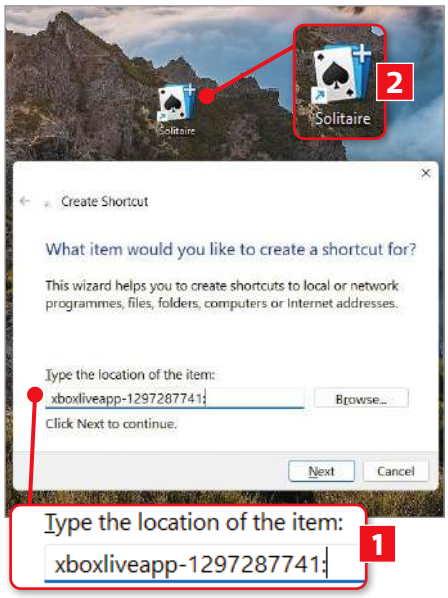


WINDOWS 10 & 11

Create an icon for Solitaire on your desktop

You can create a desktop shortcut to make it faster to launch the 'Solitaire & Casual Games' app in Windows. Right-click your desktop then select New followed by Shortcut. Next, type xboxliveapp-1297287741: into the 'Type the location of the item:' box (1 in our screenshot above) – or paste it from www.snipca.com/57081 – and click Next. Now name the shortcut and click Finish.

The 'Solitaire & Casual Games' app icon will now appear on your desktop 2 – double-click it to open.



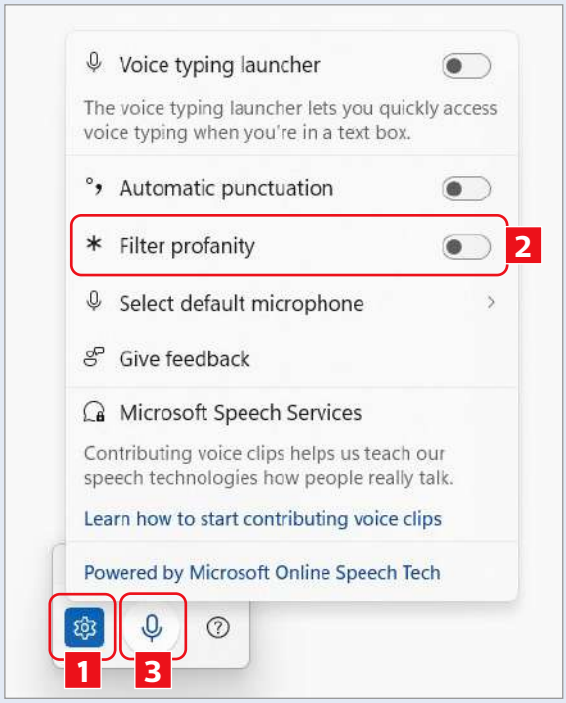
WINDOWS 11

Allow swearing when voice typing

Microsoft now lets you turn off the profanity filter in the 'Voice typing' tool, letting you swear to your heart's content.

Press Windows key+H to launch the 'Voice typing' controls then click the Settings cog (1 in our screenshot). Now click the 'Filter profanity' slider so it turns off 2. Next, click the microphone icon 3 so it turns blue then start speaking.

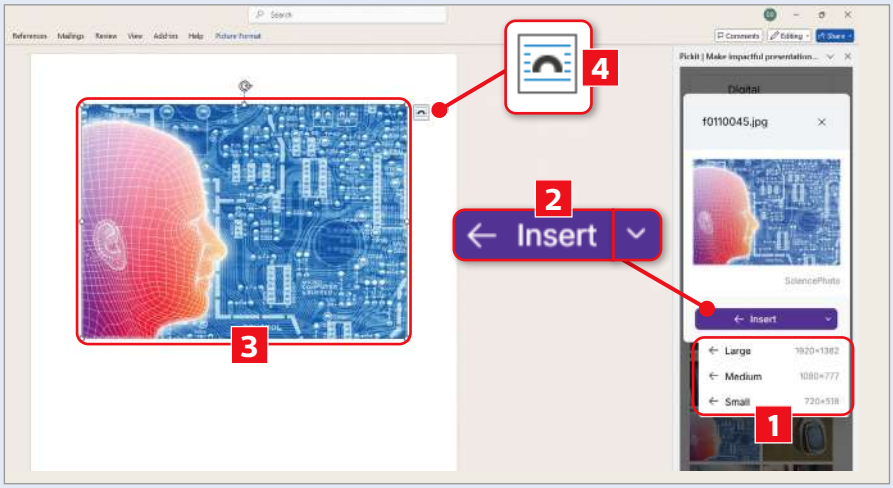
With the profanity filter turned on swear words are automatically asterisked (though it allows 'bloody' and 'crap'); with it turned off swear words are spelt in full.


Voice typing launcher
The voice typing launcher lets you quickly access voice typing when you're in a text box.
Automatic punctuation
Filter profanity
2
Select default microphone
Give feedback
Microsoft Speech Services
Contributing voice clips helps us teach our speech technologies how people really talk.
Learn how to start contributing voice clips
Powered by Microsoft Online Speech Tech
1
3

MICROSOFT POWERPOINT & WORD

Add copyright-free images to slides and documents

The Pickit add-in for PowerPoint and Word has thousands of images you can insert without copyright. Open a document or presentation then click Home at the top followed by Add-ins at the top right. Now search for pickit and click the icon that appears. Next, search for an image or scroll down and click a collection that sounds interesting. When you've found a picture, click the Insert dropdown menu to pick a size (1 in our screenshot) followed by Insert 2 and it'll appear in your presentation or document 3. Click the Layout Options icon 4 to set how text flows around the image.



ONLYOFFICE

Preview templates in OnlyOffice

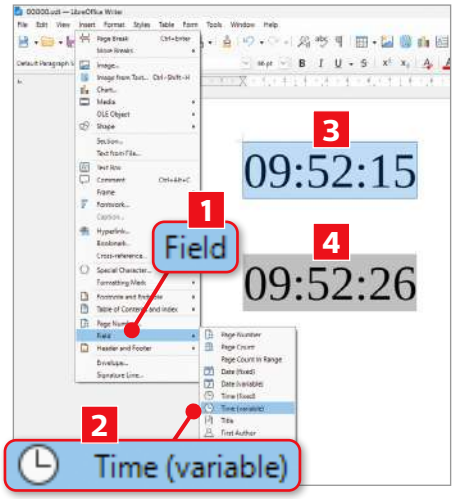
Version 9.1 of OnlyOffice, released in October, lets you preview templates before deciding to use them. Open OnlyOffice then click Templates on the left (1 in our screenshot above). Now click a template on the right and it'll appear in a preview box 2 with a description. If you like it, click 'Use this template' 3.

LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Lock text fields using plain text

By default in LibreOffice, fields like dates, times and cross-references update automatically. This can be annoying if you don't want the text to change. Version 9.3, released in August, offers a solution with the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+Shift+F2. Pressing this converts any field into plain text, locking what's there without you having to retype or paste.

In our example we clicked Insert at the top followed by Field (1 in our screenshot above) then 'Time (variable)' 2. We did this twice so two different times appeared in fields in our document. We then selected one and pressed Ctrl+Shift+F2 to highlight it. We then closed and reopened the document, and the time in that field had stayed fixed 3 while the one below showed a later time 4.



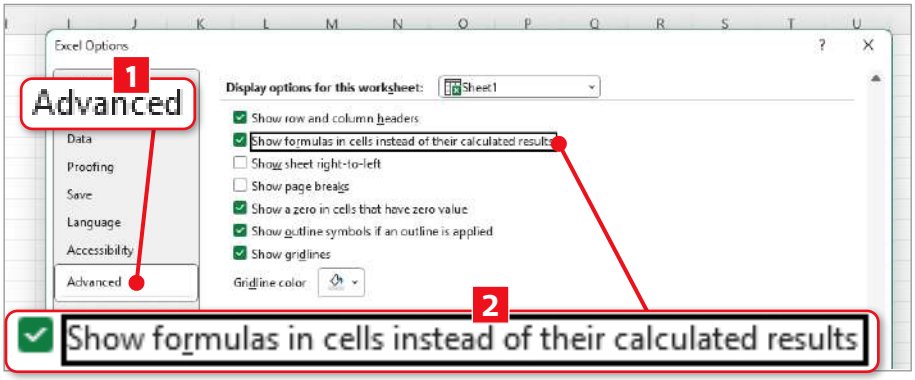
MICROSOFT EXCEL

Make spreadsheets show formulas permanently

In Excel, you can make all cells show their formulas by pressing Ctrl+` (the grave accent, usually at the top left of your keyboard). Pressing it again returns to the result of the formula.

This is a good temporary option when you want to see your formulas at a glance, but you can also make a spreadsheet permanently show only formulas so you don't have to keep pressing the shortcut. This makes it easier to check all formulas are correct across a complex spreadsheet without clicking each cell individually.

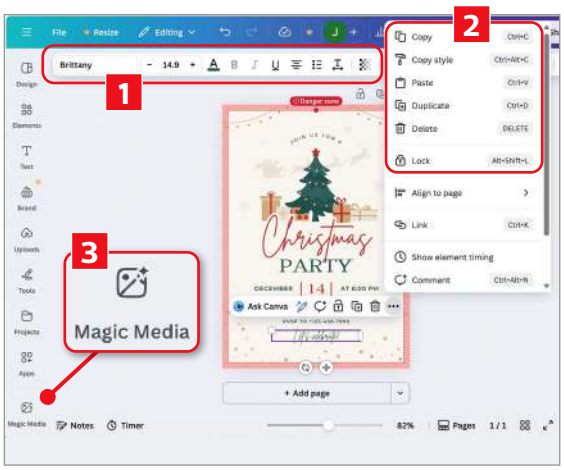
Open Excel, click File at the top left then Options at the bottom of the menu that appears. Now click Advanced (1 in our screenshot below) and scroll down to the section 'Display options for this worksheet'. Finally, tick 'Show formulas in cells instead of their calculated results' 2 and click OK.



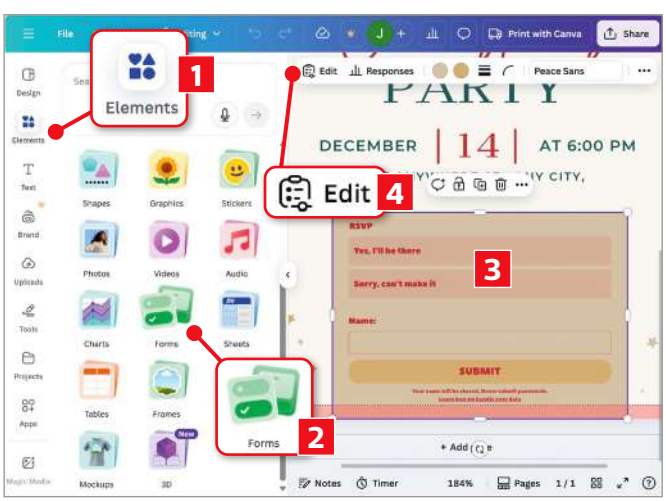
In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Track RSVPs with Canva's invitations



Select an element, change its font, then lock, copy or delete it



Insert the RSVP form then click Edit to customise it

There are plenty of tools for sending invitations and managing RSVPs, such as Evite (www.evite.com) – see Issue 703's column. But if you already use Canva (for designing logos or creating flyers), you'll be delighted that it now lets you embed an RSVP form directly into your design, so members can respond with a couple of clicks. Canva automatically collects all the responses in a spreadsheet, where you can easily sort them.

It's all part of Canva's new Creative Operating System (www.snipca.com/56963), launched in October, which also includes tools for designing email newsletters, editing videos and designing content. Some features have to be paid for, but plenty are free.

Edit your invitation

Log into Canva, or sign up for a free Canva account by visiting www.canva.com, clicking 'Sign up' in the top-right corner, then following the remaining steps. Once complete, click your user icon (lower right), Settings, Login, then follow the steps to reset your password to something of your choosing.

On the Canva homepage, click Templates, then click in the search box, type invitation and press Enter. Scroll through the thumbnails of available designs until you find one you like. If you're using the free plan, you'll need to stick to designs that don't show the Premium (crown) icon in the lower-right corner of the thumbnail. Click a thumbnail, then click 'Customise this template'.

You can change elements such as the date, time, venue and so on by clicking them, then selecting the text and typing your own words. Choose font, font size and other formatting options from the top toolbar (1 in our screenshot above left). Clicking an element will show options allowing you to lock, copy or delete it 2. The 'Magic Media' tool 3 lets you rewrite the text using AI.

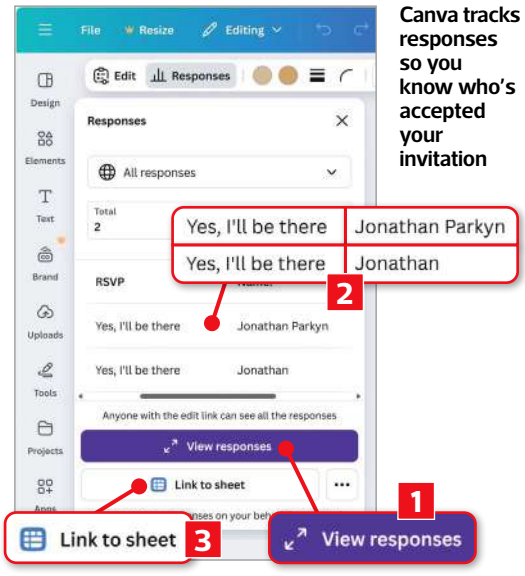
Customise RSVPs and track responses

To insert an RSVP form into your invitation, click Elements (1 in our screenshot above), Forms 2, then 'See All' next to Events. Choose the RSVP option you want to use. The form will appear somewhere in your invitation 3 – you may need to move existing elements around to accommodate it.

With the form selected, the top toolbar will show editing and formatting options for it. Click 'Edit' 4 to change the text and configure settings. If you want each respondent to give their name, for example, click the Questions tab, then click 'Short answer' and type Name:.

When you're ready, click Share at the top right, followed by 'Public view link' then 'Create public view link'. Click the Copy button next to the link and paste it into a group email.

When your invitees click the link, they'll be able to accept or decline your invitation, enter their name into the box and click the Submit button. To track your responses, open your invitation in Canva, click the RSVP form, then click 'View responses' (1 in our screenshot below) – you'll see who has responded and whether they've accepted or declined 2. Click 'Link to sheet' 3 to create a spreadsheet that tracks the responses for you automatically.



Canva tracks responses so you know who's accepted your invitation

Next issue: Create a free newsletter in Affinity

What's All the Fuss About...

Agentic OS

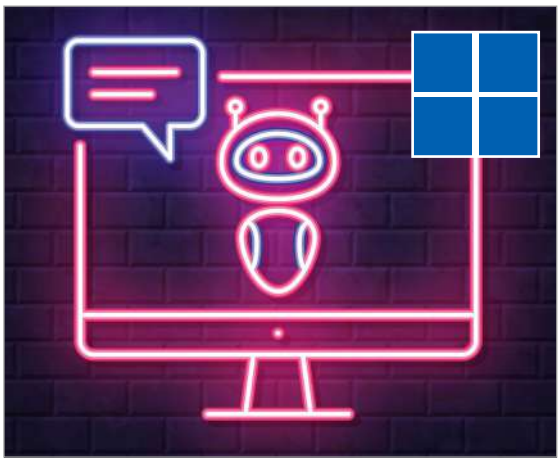
Microsoft's new buzzword for Windows hasn't gone down well

What is it?
No idea! You better ask Pavan Davuluri.

Who's he?
Microsoft's Vice President of Windows and Devices. In November, he posted on X (formerly Twitter) that Windows is "evolving into an agentic OS, connecting devices, cloud, and AI to unlock intelligent productivity and secure work anywhere" (www.snipca.com/57086). It was viewed over 1.5 million times and prompted nearly 500 comments. Not many were positive.

I'm not surprised. Did anyone know what he was talking about?
Very few. But we're fluent in Microsoft-speak, having studied this obscure language for almost 30 years. An 'agentic OS' is an operating system that predicts what you want to do based on your current and past behaviour, and responds accordingly. For example, when you import photos into your computer, an agentic operating system will scan the images then automatically create and name an album while removing duplicates, tagging people and backing them up online. Windows is nowhere near that of course, but it's Microsoft's dream.

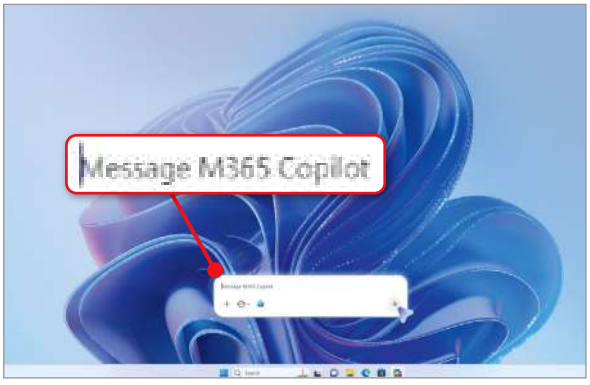
That sounds like it *might* be useful. So why weren't people keen on Davuluri's comment?
For several reasons, such as Microsoft's maddening use of jargon designed to impress their tech buddies but that's baffling to most users. Before the AI boom the adjective 'agentic' was used mostly in psychology to describe someone who has 'agency' in life – ie, is highly motivated, acts independently and influences their surroundings rather than just reacting passively. Microsoft clearly thought it sounds cutting-edge and has repeatedly used the word to describe how Windows will work in future.



But do users actually want Windows to work that way?
Not if the comments to Davuluri's post are anything to go by. Many users said they don't want or trust Windows to act independently – or 'agentically'. They'd rather keep full control over the operating system and want Microsoft to prioritise more fundamental concerns, like making Microsoft more reliable and easier to use. They also accused Davuluri of overhyping AI's potential and using meaningless marketing terms.

Members of the 'r/windows' forum on Reddit were just as scathing: www.snipca.com/57088.

So are people getting disillusioned by AI?
Not necessarily. But they are getting fed up with companies stuffing their operating systems, browsers and software with pointless AI tools. Microsoft is one of the worst offenders, having shoved Copilot into Windows, Office, Bing and Edge. Sometimes it's useful, but often it just slows you down.



Microsoft has been shoving Copilot into all its tools, not to everyone's liking

Has Microsoft responded to the criticism?
Sort of. Davuluri closed comments on his original post and then replied to former Microsoft developer Gergely Orosz, who had said he "can't see any reason for software engineers to choose Windows with this weird direction they are doubling down on" and that developers should use Macs and Linux instead. But Davuluri's response was an exercise in stating the obvious, meekly admitting "we know we have work to do" and that "we want developers to choose Windows" (www.snipca.com/57090).

Is that it?
Well, he also offered to "connect" with Orosz to tell him what his team is doing to address his areas of concern. But Orosz put it best when he said Windows "should be an operating system, not an ecosystem".

What did he mean by that?
Windows should go back to being an uncomplicated system based on the user's needs, not a sprawling AI playground for Microsoft to test every quirky idea that someone comes up with in a team meeting.

Sounds simple when you put it like that...
It is. Or at least it should be. If Microsoft continues to make Windows 'agentic' then users might show some agency of their own and choose a different operating system.

BEST NEW SOFTWARE for 2026

Don't limit yourself and your PC to the same old programs for the next 12 months. Robert Irvine recommends 10 brilliant free tools to download over the coming year

Now we've survived the biggest software event of 2025 – Microsoft ending support for Windows 10 – it's time to start looking to the future. And whether you've upgraded to Windows 11 or stayed with its predecessor, your PC can always benefit from some useful new software.

In our Best Free Software section (see page 18), we regularly recommend popular and reliable programs, such as PowerToys, Files, Glow, IrfanView and Thunderbird. These are frequently updated to give us new options to explore and explain, and we wouldn't get by without them.

But with a new year almost upon us, we've decided to put those old favourites aside (for now) and focus on some exciting new software. In this feature, we recommend 10 brilliant programs for 2026 that have only appeared – or come to our attention – in the past 12 months.

For each suggestion, we've included an alternative new or recently updated tool you can use instead of – or as well as – our first choice. We also name-check equivalent programs you can do without.

Because our recommendations are new, several are still in beta and may suffer a few bugs or trigger a security warning (for being 'not commonly downloaded'). But they're all safe to use and provide lots of ways to expand and enhance your PC experience over the next year.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Block ads and trackers automatically as you browse the web
- Debloat Windows to remove unwanted apps and junk files
- Back up your photos securely using end-to-end encryption
- Capture screenshots of videos with a single click
- Monitor the internet quality of your home network
- Keep all your software updated to the latest versions
- Download multiple files from the web in one go
- Get unlimited email storage across your devices

BROWSE THE WEB SPEEDILY & PRIVATELY

1 Helium Browser

www.snipca.com/56979

2025 has seen the rise of 'agentic' AI browsers, such as Opera Neon, Perplexity Comet and ChatGPT Atlas (currently macOS-only). Other browsers, including Edge, Firefox, Brave and Chrome (in the US), have kept up by adding and expanding their own AI features, sometimes to the annoyance rather than approval of their users.

Helium is a new, streamlined alternative to those increasingly bloated programs, offering a speedy and secure way to browse the web. It's based on Chromium and is still in the 'alpha' early stage of development, but is already a great choice for those who value their online privacy over unwanted AI tools.

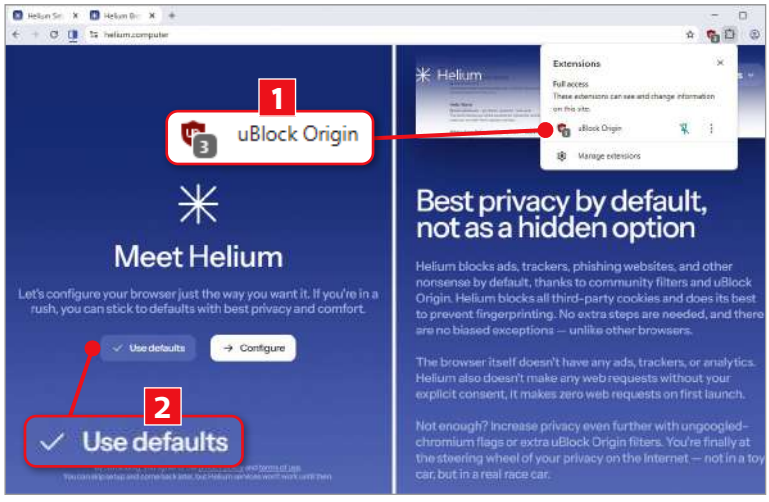
Helium comes with the brilliant uBlock Origin installed (1 in our screenshot below), which automatically blocks ads, trackers and malicious websites, and can be customised with additional filters. Just choose 'Use defaults' 2 when you first launch the browser.

You can install other extensions from the Chrome Web Store, including Manifest V2 tools Google now disallows and a third-party password manager such as Bitwarden or Proton Pass. For security reasons, Helium doesn't have a built-in password manager (see our Cover Feature in Issue 720 – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/56977).

The browser enforces HTTPS on all websites and its default search engine is the privacy-focused DuckDuckGo. It also supports DuckDuckGo's 'bangs', which let you search using your favourite websites and online tools by typing simple commands, for example !w for Wikipedia and !yt for YouTube. Explore Helium's directory of more than 10,000 bangs at www.snipca.com/56978 – there's one for ChatGPT (!cgbt) for when you need AI assistance.

Other than a handy split view for browsing two tabs side by side (pictured below), Helium doesn't have many other features. This keeps its design very minimalist, fast on page loading and low on memory usage. It doesn't (yet) have a mobile app or sync your data across devices, but you can import your bookmarks from other browsers.

With no bloat or gimmicks, and privacy enabled by default, Helium is definitely the browser to watch in 2026.


1
uBlock Origin
Meet Helium
Let's configure your browser just the way you want it. If you're in a rush, you can stick to defaults with best privacy and comfort.
Use defaults
Configure
2
Use defaults
Helium
Extensions
Best privacy by default, not as a hidden option
Helium blocks ads, trackers, phishing websites, and other nonsense by default, thanks to community filters and uBlock Origin. Helium blocks all third-party cookies and does its best to prevent fingerprinting. No extra steps are needed, and there are no biased exceptions – unlike other browsers.
The browser itself doesn't have any ads, trackers, or analytics. Helium also doesn't make any web requests without your explicit consent, it makes zero web requests on first launch.
Not enough? Increase privacy even further with ungoogled-chromium flags or extra uBlock Origin filters. You're finally at the steering wheel of your privacy on the Internet – not in a toy car, but in a real race car.

Helium offers a fast and private way to browse the web, without any bloat

Also try...

Zen Browser

www.snipca.com/56988

Zen is based on Firefox and includes that browser's privacy tools. It has an attractive, streamlined design that can be customised with colourful themes and shortcuts to your most used online services.

Like Helium, Zen has a split-view mode, and also offers a Workspaces feature, which lets you switch between different profiles – each with their own tabs and settings.

See our Workshop in Issue 708 to learn how to master the browser.

You don't need...

Opera Air

Opera now has four desktop browsers: One, GX, Neon and Air. The latter is the most gimmicky, offering 'mindfulness' exercises to help you breathe properly and meditate while browsing the web. But its 'soothing soundscapes' can soon drive you to distraction.

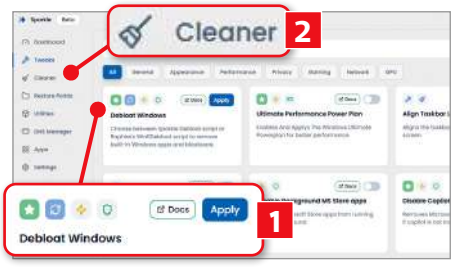
OPTIMISE WINDOWS & REMOVE JUNK

2 Sparkle

www.snipca.com/56980

Free software for optimising Windows is often overly technical, with advanced settings that can actually mess up your system, or frustratingly basic, with 'snake oil' features of minimal benefit. Sparkle avoids these problems by packing a host of useful optimisation tools into a friendly interface that makes it simple to understand and use.

Sparkle provides an overview of your system on its home screen, and gives you easy access to its dozens of tweaks. The most powerful is Debloat Windows (1 in our screenshot), which runs a script to remove Microsoft's built-in apps and bloatware from your PC (you can choose which to keep).



Sparkle's friendly interface makes it easy to remove junk from your PC

Other tweaks let you remove OneDrive, show seconds in the taskbar clock, enable Windows' Ultimate Performance power plan and disable Copilot. Click the 'Cleaner' tab 2 to free up drive space by deleting temporary files, old Windows updates and other junk; and Restore Points to wipe old system-restore points. Sparkle offers to create a restore point before you make any changes, but you only need to keep the most recent one.

On the Utilities tab, you can run Windows tools such as System File Checker and Disk Cleanup at the click of

a button, and quickly open the Registry Editor and Device Manager. Sparkle also has a software manager on its Apps tab, which lets you install and uninstall listed programs (see screenshot), and a DNS manager for tweaking network settings.

Unlike some system optimisers, there are no options locked behind Upgrade buttons and tweaks can be instantly undone by switching off their sliders. Sparkle triggers a Microsoft Defender SmartScreen warning, but it's completely safe to use so just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'. It's still in beta so you may encounter a few bugs.

Also try...

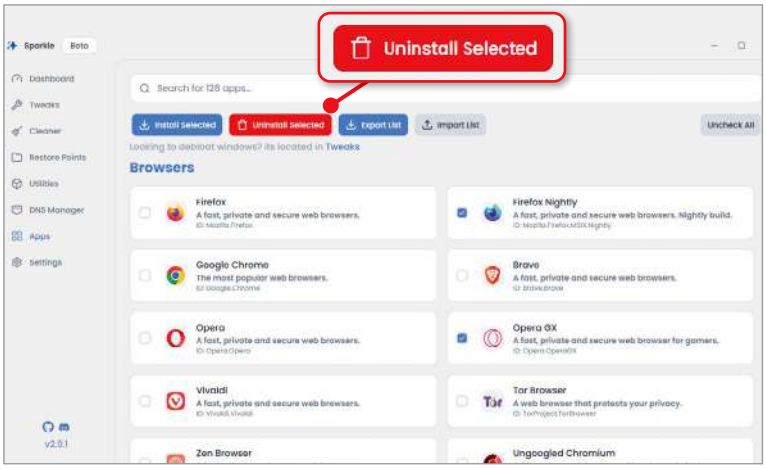
Fixyfier

www.fixyfier.com

Although it's not as versatile or user-friendly as Sparkle, this new Microsoft Store app is a smaller download (25MB compared with 103MB). It combines useful information about your system with tools for fixing common problems and removing junk files.

Use the Deep Fix option to perform a series of maintenance tasks, and 'Cleanup & Optimize' to clear temporary files, defragment your hard drive and securely wipe free space. Unlike Sparkle, Fixyfier doesn't offer to create a restore point before you apply its tweaks, but you can do so manually.

Sparkle can uninstall all your unwanted programs with a single click



You don't need...

CCleaner

CCleaner 7 was released in October, and even diehard users of the once-popular cleanup tool have called it "astoundingly bad" (www.snipca.com/56992).

Most of its optimisation options are now restricted to the paid-for version; the interface has been redesigned to make it harder to find essential tools; and it's no longer possible to keep important cookies when you carry out a cleanup. What a mess.

BACK UP YOUR PHOTOS SECURELY

3 Ente Photos

www.ente.io

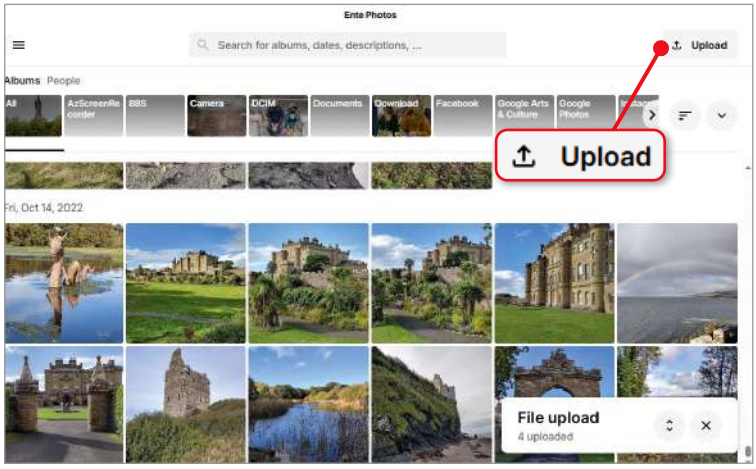
Ente Photos is a new photo-storage service with a focus on privacy. Unlike Google Photos (see below), it secures all your photo backups with end-to-end encryption, so no one but you can view their content.

Ente has apps for Windows, macOS, Linux, Android and iOS, allowing you to sync your pictures between your desktop and mobile devices. You can organise photos into albums, share them with other people (still end-to-end encrypted) and enjoy 10GB of free online storage. Ente's paid-for plans, which offer 50GB to 2TB of storage, are priced from £2.49 to £19.99 a month.

While it can't rival Google Photos' range of editing options, Ente Photos has a similar Memories feature and tools for cropping, rotating and enhancing images. It also includes face recognition, so you can tag people in photos – this is done locally on your PC rather than using cloud-based AI – and a handy option for detecting and deleting duplicate images.

Adding pictures to Ente Photos is very straightforward – in the Windows app, simply drag files or folders from your desktop. To import your collection from Google Photos, first download it using Google Takeout (www.snipca.com/56983), then click the Upload button (see screenshot) and select 'Google takeout'.

Ente Photos is a private alternative to Google Photos for all your devices



Also try...

Proton Drive

www.snipca.com/56994

Proton Drive also protects your photos (and other files) using end-to-end encryption and lets you sync them between your PC, phone and tablet. Its mobile app can back up pictures automatically as soon as you take them.

The free plan gives you 5GB of online storage, which you can increase to 200GB by upgrading to Drive Plus for £4 a month or £24.48 when paid annually. Earlier this year, Proton added the option to import your pictures from Google Photos.

You don't need...

Google Photos

All the pictures you upload to Google Photos are analysed to identify their content and collect metadata about when, where and how they were taken. Although your photos are encrypted in transit and 'at rest', they're not protected by end-to-end encryption – Google holds the encryption keys and can access your snaps at any time.

EDIT & BROWSE IMAGES MORE EASILY

4 AlterPhoto
www.alterphoto.net

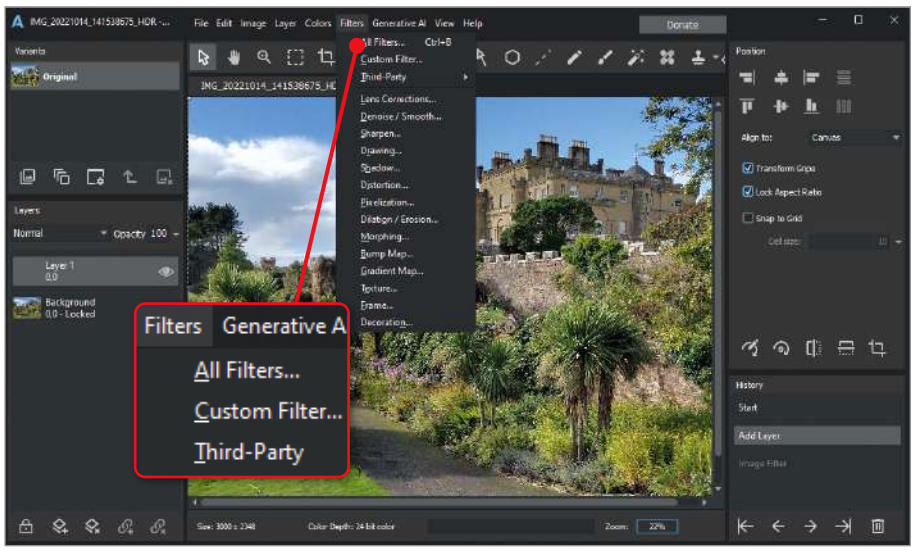
Formerly called Photo Variants, this powerful image editor has been renamed and updated for 2026. It offers many of the advanced tools of GIMP (see below) and Paint.NET – including layers, retouching brushes and colour controls – but in a less cluttered and confusing interface.

Some edits and enhancements are performed instantly, while others open a preview window, showing 'before' and 'after' versions of the picture. This lets you adjust the strength of the effect to get the precise result you want.

Use AlterPhoto's filters (see screenshot right) to adjust the texture, sharpness and noise of your photos, pixelate and distort them, and transform them into sketches. The program stores a history of all the edits you make, so you can quickly revert to previous versions.

AlterPhoto also offers AI features, such as removing backgrounds and replacing objects, but these require an API key. Select 'API Key' in the Generative AI menu, click 'https://platform.stability.ai' and sign up for an account with Stability AI to get 25 free credits.

By default, AlterPhoto saves images in its own ALTR format, to preserve "all layers, variants and project settings". To save in a common image format such as PNG, JPEG or TIF, choose 'Export As...' rather than 'Save As...' in the File menu.



AlterPhoto includes a variety of filters for enhancing your images

Also try...

PhoXoSee
www.snipca.com/56997

Claiming to be the "world's fastest image viewer", this lightweight tool (a mere 1.6MB in size) loads your pictures instantly. Click its arrow keys or press Space to browse other photos in the folder, or view them as a film strip.

Other than resizing photos to your desired dimensions, PhoXoSee preserves its speed by keeping features to a minimum. It supports all major image formats and recently added the option to convert HEIC to JPEG.

You don't need..

GIMP
The long-awaited GIMP 3.0 was released in March, but its new features were underwhelming and its learning curve remains as steep as ever. It's a superb free program for image-editing professionals, but for quick photo tweaks GIMP is too much to take in.

WATCH VIDEOS ON YOUR DESKTOP

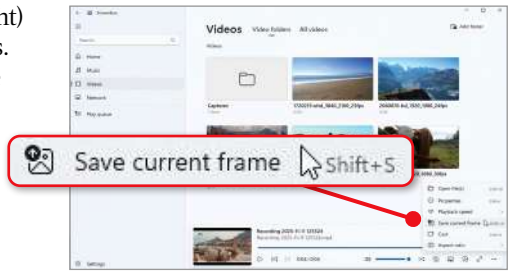
5 Screenbox Media Player
www.snipca.com/56999

While we wait patiently for VLC Media Player 4.0 to arrive (it's now seven years since version 3.0), we've switched to Screenbox Media Player for our video-playback needs. It's based on the same LibVLC engine as VLC, but is faster to load and even easier to use, with a modern, lightweight interface.

As well as playing video and audio files stored on your PC, Screenbox can stream them from a network device such as a NAS drive. You can add files to a playback queue, manually or by selecting a folder, with all the main media formats supported.

Although Screenbox lacks VLC's advanced features, plug-ins and DVD playback, its media player offers a picture-in-picture mode, playback-speed controls and closed captions. You can capture screenshots of videos by choosing 'Save current frame' (see screenshot right) and cast content to compatible devices.

See our Workshop in Issue 713 (page 38) for step-by-step instructions for using Screenbox.



Screenbox Media Player is a simple free alternative to VLC for 2026

Also try...

PotPlayer
www.snipca.com/57013

PotPlayer is closer to VLC than Screenbox in terms of features and has long been a popular alternative. We're recommending it here because of its superb new AI option, which generates real-time subtitles for any video you play.

Click the Subtitles tab then the three-line menu and choose 'Create subtitles from audio (Real-time)'. Select 'Use if there are no subtitles' or 'Always use', then 'Create subtitles from audio (Real-time)' again. PotPlayer will install its default 'tiny' AI model and generate subtitles for your video.

You don't need...

RealPlayer
Now in its 25th version, RealPlayer is as bloated and ad-stuffed as ever, with all its best features limited to paid-for plans (from £17.50). Unlike VLC and PotPlayer, the free version won't even let you play DVDs.

Computer active

READER OFFER!

ADD A DISC FOR £5.95

Upgrade to Windows 11 Pro for just £49.99!

Your PC almost certainly came with Windows 11 Home. But did you know it's easy to upgrade to **Windows 11 Pro** to get advanced features like BitLocker drive encryption?

There's no need to install a new version of Windows – just take your new Professional key, go to System, Activate, then select 'Change Product Key'.

To upgrade, visit **www.snipca.com/50563** and click the red **Buy Now** button on the right.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **16 December, 2025**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

MONITOR YOUR INTERNET QUALITY

6 Orb

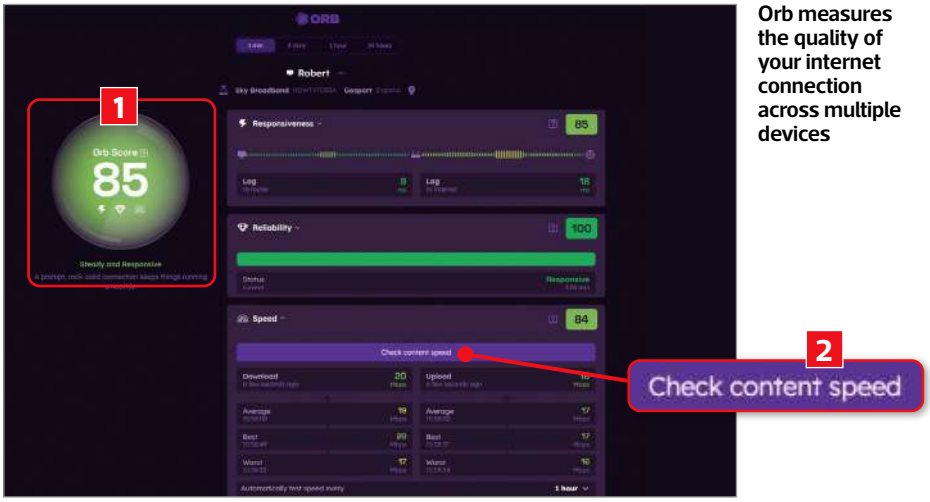
www.orb.net

From the creators of Speedtest.net, Orb offers a new and more accurate way to monitor the performance of your home network. Rather than just test your internet speed, Orb also measures the responsiveness of your connection (how quickly your network responds to requests) and its reliability (the consistency of its responses).

This provides a fuller picture of your internet quality – not merely how fast data travels between your device and the test server. Orb monitors your Wi-Fi network continuously and can be installed on your PC, phone and tablet to provide readings from each one, and tell you their 'Orb scores'.

Install the Windows app, sign up for a free Orb account and your dashboard will provide an initial Orb score for your internet connection (1 in our screenshot). Click this number to view real-time Responsiveness and Reliability data, then click 'Check content speed' 2 to perform a speed test and update your score accordingly.

Next, install the Orb app on your phone and/or tablet – its free plan supports up to five devices, which it calls 'orbs' – and get the score there. You can monitor all your orbs simultaneously through the dashboard of each app, to spot changes in network performance.



Orb measures the quality of your internet connection across multiple devices

Also try...

Wireless Network Watcher

www.snipca.com/56720

This free tool from prolific developer NirSoft provides details of all the devices currently connected to your Wi-Fi network. This includes device names, manufacturers and IP addresses, so you can quickly identify intruders.

Combine it with NirSoft's recently updated WifiDiagnosticsView (www.snipca.com/56581), which detects events such as changes in your Wi-Fi adapter's signal quality, and network disconnection and reconnection. Both tools trigger a SmartScreen warning, but are safe to use so click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

You don't need...

Fing Desktop

Fing is an excellent tool for monitoring your home network, but you no longer get much for free. For essential features such as device detection and router-vulnerability checks, you need to subscribe to its Starter plan for £3.99 a month or £39.99 a year.

DISGUISE YOUR LOCATION WITH A VPN

7 VPNly

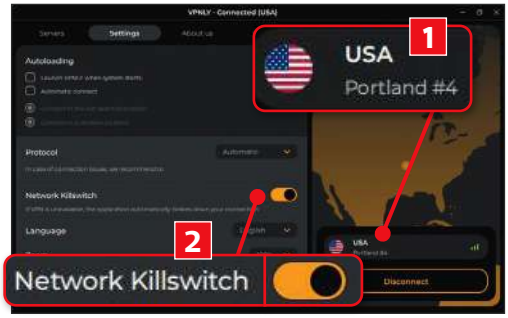
www.vpnly.com

VPNs have been the most talked-about privacy tools of 2025. The introduction of the UK's Online Safety Act in July spurred many web users to turn to them to bypass the new age-verification checks, though – as we explained in our Cover Feature in Issue 717 (get it from www.snipca.com/57021) – they have many other uses.

VPNly is a new, free VPN, which is usually a reason to be wary. But it's based in Switzerland (like Proton VPN, www.snipca.com/57047), has a no-logs policy and you don't need to create an account to use it.

VPNly has apps for Windows, macOS, Android and iOS, and Chromium and Firefox extensions, so you can use it on all your devices. On your PC, you may be prompted to install the driver TAP-Windows Provider V9 – this is safe and required to hide your IP address.

Connect to servers in France, Germany, the Netherlands and the US (1 in our screenshot), and enable the kill switch 2 to preserve your anonymity when your VPN connection drops. Note that VPNly hasn't yet been independently audited to verify its privacy practices. Hopefully, this will be rectified in 2026.



VPNly has free servers in four countries and includes a kill switch

Also try...

Proton VPN for Android TV

www.snipca.com/57023

VPNly doesn't have a smart TV app, but Proton VPN has a great one for Android/Google TV. In November, the app was updated to let you connect to a VPN server automatically when you turn on your TV – go to Settings and enable Auto-connect.

Additionally, the TV app now includes the NetShield feature for blocking ads and trackers. However, this is only available with a paid-for Proton VPN plan.

You don't need...

Turbo VPN

This popular VPN has over 100 million users, but privacy experts warn it can't be trusted (www.snipca.com/57024). It shares your data with Chinese servers, its free version is crammed with ads and its subscriptions are overpriced.

UPDATE YOUR SOFTWARE FASTER

8 QuickInstaller

www.snipca.com/57025

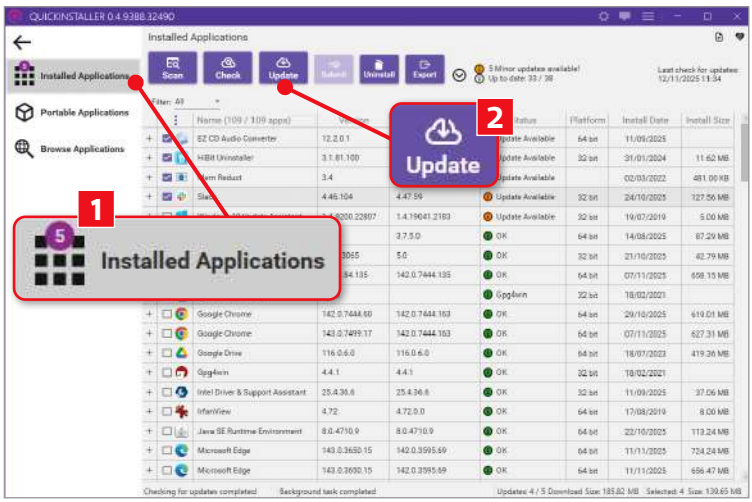
It's essential to keep your PC software up to date in 2026, to protect it from security threats and fix bugs that affect its performance. But that's easier said than done when you have dozens – or even hundreds – of programs installed.

QuickInstaller makes the job much easier by downloading and installing all the latest updates in one go. It detects all the software you have installed (1 in our screenshot right), tells you which tools have updates available – and the relevant version numbers – and lets you update them with a single click 2.

As it's still at the 'preview' stage, QuickInstaller doesn't yet update every program it lists. Click 'Submit' to suggest new tools for inclusion in its library of over 1,000.

Access this library by clicking Browse Applications, and download new programs without visiting their developers' websites. They're helpfully organised into categories such as Maintenance, Graphics and Internet – select all the tools you want, then click Install.

QuickInstaller also includes an uninstaller for removing unwanted programs. Its design is a little rough around the edges, but it lives up to its name in performance.



QuickInstaller makes it easy to install the latest software updates in one go

Also try...

Patch My PC Home Updater

www.snipca.com/56500

Patch My PC has a smarter interface than QuickInstaller, but updates fewer programs (currently 536). It was updated regularly in 2025, adding support for ARM-based PCs and software; the option to filter tools in the My Apps List and App Library; and a new Startup tab for managing processes that run on Windows boot.

Back in May, Patch My PC finally introduced a portable version – see our Workshop in Issue 712 (page 38).

You don't need...

UpdateHub

We had high hopes for this tool when it launched in 2023, despite its updates being slow and often failing altogether. But since QuickInstaller arrived and Patch My PC was revived, we no longer need UpdateHub – and it's a year since it was updated itself.

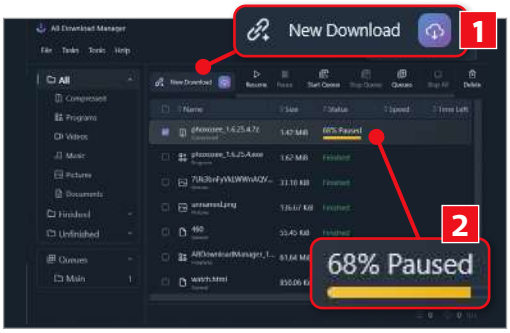
SIMPLIFY & SPEED UP YOUR DOWNLOADS

9 AB Download Manager

www.snipca.com/57027

Free download managers often contain PUPs, adverts and upgrade nags, so most of us stick with our browsers' built-in tools. AB Download Manager is a new, fast and junk-free alternative that's impressively easy to use.

Click the New Download button (1 in our screenshot below), copy a file or image link to your clipboard, and AB Download Manager will import it. Click OK, choose where to save the file and click Download. Repeat this for as many files you want, to download them all simultaneously.



AB Download Manager is a simple and speedy way to download files

AB Download Manager works in tandem with its Chrome and Firefox extensions. When you click a download link on a web page, or right-click a link or image and choose 'Download with AB DM', the program opens its Download box to save the file to your PC. Note that this doesn't work on YouTube or most other online videos.

You can pause 2, resume and queue your downloads, and customise the interface to make it easier to read. Click 'Settings', then Appearance, increase the UI Scale percentage (we've used 125%) and change the theme from the default dark.

Also try...

Stacher7

www.stacher.io

Stacher7 is one of the few free YouTube downloaders that still works. A recent redesign made it friendlier to use and it's regularly updated to keep up with YouTube's changes.

Simply paste the URL of a YouTube video into the bar at the top and click the Download button. Once the download is complete, click the video to watch it in your default media player. Stacher7 triggers a SmartScreen warning, but just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

You don't need...

Vividl

We've previously recommended Vividl (back in Issue 664) as a way to download videos without restrictions. But we, and other Vividl users, have found it now displays error messages when you try to save videos from YouTube.

ENCRYPT YOUR EMAILS ON ANY DEVICE

10 Atomic Mail

www.snipca.com/57051

Throughout 2025, we've frequently extolled the benefits of ditching Gmail and Outlook for Proton Mail. The new Atomic Mail claims to be even more private and better value than that email service, and certainly looks like a worthy rival.

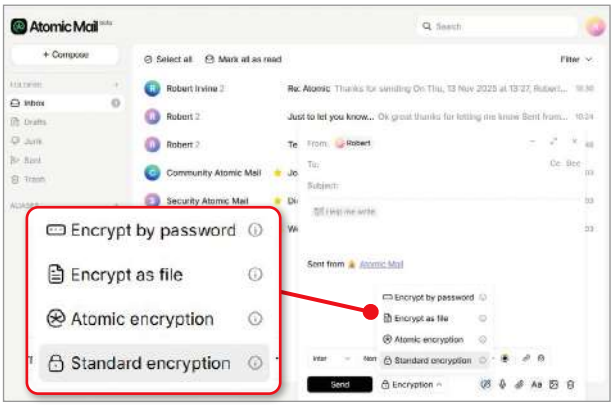
Like Proton Mail, it's ad-free and offers zero-access and end-to-end encryption, to ensure no-one but you and the recipients can read your messages. Atomic Mail similarly lets you create up to 10 email aliases, and has apps for Windows, macOS, Android and iOS, in addition to its web version.

But whereas Proton Mail's free plan only gives you 500MB of storage (expandable to 1GB by performing specific actions), Atomic Mail's free storage is unlimited – and there currently isn't a paid-for plan.

It also lets you create as many folders as you want – Proton restricts you to three. You can use its AI features to compose and summarise messages, and hear them read aloud, and choose between four types of encryption (see screenshot below).

Before you get too excited, note that Atomic Mail doesn't let you import emails from other providers – that option will be introduced in 2026. More frustratingly, messages we sent to Outlook and Yahoo Mail addresses were blocked – in Gmail, they initially appeared in the Spam folder until we marked them as safe. We were able to receive emails from those services without any problems.

Hopefully those issues will be resolved soon (the company is "working hard on updates"), because Atomic Mail looks very promising. It's worth signing up for while it's still in beta and free.



Atomic Mail keeps your messages private using four different types of encryption

Also try...

Tuta Mail

tuta.com

Formerly called Tutanota, Tuta Mail is another encrypted email service that's being promoted as an alternative to Proton Mail. Although currently it only offers 1GB of free storage, its paid-for Revolutionary plan offers 20GB for £3.18 per month, which is cheaper and more generous than Proton.

A subscription also gives you 15 email aliases (compared to Proton's 10) and unlimited calendars and folders (you get one and three, respectively, with a free plan). Tuta Mail also has apps for all desktop and mobile devices.

You don't need...

Fastmail

This Australian email service doesn't offer end-to-end encryption, claiming it doesn't provide "a meaningful increase in security". Although it offers lots of features, there's no free plan and subscriptions are priced from £5.40 per month or £54 a year. ca

Our software predictions for 2026

More ARM builds of programs

It's estimated that by the end of 2026, 30 per cent of new PCs will have ARM CPUs rather than x86. Developers are therefore creating ARM builds of their software, to make the most of ARM's speed and efficiency. Most browsers now have ARM versions, as does VLC, and more ARM tools are on their way.

Return of desktop-search tools

Google is testing a new AI-powered tool for Windows that searches for files on your PC and the web (www.snipca.com/57040) – just like its old Google Desktop program. With Microsoft now offering desktop search through Copilot and Command Palette in PowerToys, we predict other companies will create their own equivalents.

People won't embrace AI browsers

ChatGPT Atlas has received a lukewarm response – and not only because it's currently limited to Macs. There are privacy concerns about the data AI browsers collect about you, and their 'agentic tasks' require a lot of processing power. We think most people will stick with their preferred browsers in 2026 and use AI on their own terms.

Linux's popularity will keep rising

Although most of us have now decided whether to stay with Windows 10 for another year or upgrade to Windows 11, Linux is becoming more mainstream. Zorin OS 18 (see our How To on page 35) is proving highly popular, and other Linux distros are also attracting Windows users.

NEXT ISSUE On sale Wednesday 17 December

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WHAT YOU MUST UNINSTALL IN 2026

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- **Keep your VPN working next year** There's a real danger it could be blocked

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Tech gifts we're buying this Christmas

This year, get your loved ones presents they can use with their PCs and phones. Robert Irvine suggests 10 useful and quirky tech stocking fillers for under £20 (except one)

Most reasonable people don't expect to get an expensive new phone, laptop or smart TV for Christmas. But there are lots of useful tech gifts that won't break the bank, and will be more gratefully received than a set of socks or scented soaps.

Here we suggest 10 tech-themed stocking fillers, which are all available for under £20 – except one. All prices were correct at the time of going to press.

SanDisk Extreme Fit USB drive

From £9.99 from www.snipca.com/57048

Measuring just 18.5x15.7x3.6mm (HxWxD) – about the size of a cufflink – the SanDisk Extreme Fit (pictured below) is so small you can keep it permanently plugged into your computer, with no risk of knocking it.

The cheapest version offers 64GB of storage for £9.99, but the best gift option is the 128GB drive. This costs £13.99 and offers USB 3.2 transfer speeds of up to 400MB/s. There are also 256GB, 512GB and 1TB models, priced from £24.99 to £99.99.

SanDisk's miniscule USB drive offers huge capacity for under £20

Amuvec Multi Charger Cable

£6.94 from www.snipca.com/57055

Spare a loved one the hassle of changing USB cables whenever they charge their phone, tablet or other device, with this 4-in-1 charging cable (pictured below). It has two Lightning connectors for older iPhones and iPads, one USB-C connector and one MicroUSB, plus a USB-A for plugging it into your computer or charger plug.

The colourful cable is 1.2m in length and nylon-braided to prevent knots. If you'd prefer a more portable alternative, consider the Xoopar Octopus Charging Cable (£13.46 from www.snipca.com/57054). This has the same connectors but much shorter reach.

Charge four devices at once using this USB cable

Enlarge mobile videos with this screen magnifier from LAC Future

LAC Future Phone Screen Magnifier

£12.99 from www.snipca.com/57091

Stop a friend or relative squinting at their phone when they watch online videos by buying them a screen magnifier. This 12in LAC Future model (pictured above) can make what's happening on-screen two to three times larger.

Just insert a phone in the stand, pull up the lens on the magnification screen and you'll be able to view videos and other content more comfortably. The magnifier helps reduce eye strain and can be folded up to take on your travels.

Iniu Power Bank

From £13.99 from www.snipca.com/57079

A power bank is a practical present, but the traditional black-slab design can look

This slim power bank is a stylish and practical gift

a bit dull. This Iniu model is available in blue, orange and red (pictured above), as well as black, and has an ultra-slim (19mm) build the manufacturer claims makes it the thinnest 10,000mAh device on the market.

Unlike most power banks, it has USB-C input and output, plus two USB-A ports, so you can easily charge your gadgets on the go, and replenish the bank's battery too. As one reviewer comments, it "strikes a perfect balance between size, capacity and performance".

Tapo P110 Smart Plug (2-pack)

£15.19 from www.snipca.com/57058

Help someone slash their energy bill using this twin-pack of Tapo smart plugs. As well as remotely switching lamps and other electrical devices on and off, its app can monitor electricity usage and identify which appliances are costing the most money.

Get two energy-saving smart plugs for £15

The Tapo P110 can be controlled using your voice via Google Assistant and Alexa, and lets you set up schedules to turn connected devices on and off at specific times. A single plug costs £8.99, but the two-pack is better value.

HXTDBY Desktop Cleaner

£13.99 from www.snipca.com/57065

This owl-themed mini vacuum cleaner (pictured above right) is the perfect gift for someone who eats at their desk or while using their laptop. It hoovers up crumbs, dust and debris from keyboards and surfaces, and comes with a nozzle and brushes for getting into crevices.

The vacuum has strong suction and works quietly, and can be recharged via USB. The owl's eyes light up while it's in action - unscrew its bottom to empty the waste.

Remove keyboard crumbs with this owl-themed mini vacuum cleaner

Daymeet LED TV Backlights

£11.99 from www.snipca.com/57066

You don't need to spend a fortune on a Philips Hue setup to give the gift of smart lighting. These LED TV backlights not only create a colourful, cinematic viewing experience, but also reduce eyestrain when watching telly in a dark room.

Attach the light strip to the back of a TV set and control the colour, intensity and changing speed of the lights using the supplied remote or mobile app. The strip is powered via a USB port on the TV – make sure you choose the right size for the recipient's set.

Reduce eye strain with this smart lighting strip

And one for over £20

Anker Soundcore Select 4 Go Ultra

£24.96 from www.snipca.com/57075

This waterproof Bluetooth speaker (pictured) is the ideal present for anyone who likes listening to music, podcasts and audiobooks in the bath, shower or while doing the washing up. It's IP67-rated, which means it can be submerged in one metre of water for up to 30 minutes. It can even float – offering more entertainment than a rubber duck.

The Soundcore Select 4 Go Ultra has a 5W audio output and an impressive battery life that delivers 20 hours of playback time. It's available in a choice of colours, including blue (pictured), purple and green.

Although it exceeds our budget by £4.96, we're happy to splash the extra cash. Amazon Prime members can buy it for £18.99.

Atumtek Camera Remote Shutter

£8.99 from www.snipca.com/57071

This tiny remote control (96x50x1.7mm, pictured below) makes it easy to take selfies, capture group shots (with the photographer in them) and even create stop-motion videos. Connect it to a phone via Bluetooth then press the button to take a photo - no app required.

It works over a 10-metre range, is compatible with Android and iOS, and has a long battery life. You get two remotes in the pack plus a wrist strap.

Take better selfies using this Bluetooth remote

Betron Screen Cleaner

£6.99 from www.snipca.com/57067

If you've ever cringed as a friend scrubbed their dirty phone screen with the hem of their T-shirt, buy them this nifty gadget (pictured right). It contains cleaning fluid you spray on to the screen of a smartphone, tablet or laptop, and is encased in microfibre cloth to wipe the liquid off – without leaving smudges or streaks.

Clean your device's screen without smears and smudges

The Screen Cleaner is small enough (92x33x34mm) to slip into your pocket or bag, and the fluid can be replaced when it runs out. It's a hygienic stocking filler people will actually use. ca

What's being axed in 2026

Is your old tech living on borrowed time? **Jonathan Parkyn** reveals what's destined for the digital scrapheap in the year ahead

Every year, tech companies bombard us with shiny, new products, while quietly consigning older devices, software and services to the scrapheap. Some are formally retired, following a long and distinguished product lifecycle. Some are replaced or absorbed into newer products. And others are inexplicably abandoned, leaving users scrambling to find a replacement.

To help you plan ahead, here we reveal the tools, products and services that are destined – or highly likely – to stop working over the next 12 months.

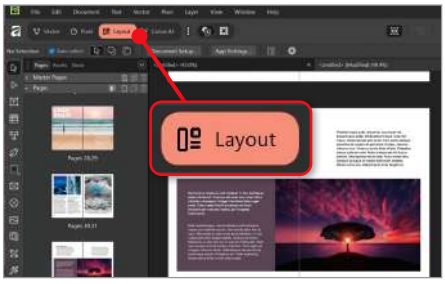
What will *definitely* stop working

Office 2021 and Microsoft Publisher

Microsoft routinely retires older versions of Office when they reach the end of their product lifecycle – October 2026 will see the curtain fall on Office 2021, for example. What's different is that this year, Microsoft is killing off one of Office's long-standing components, Publisher, *altogether*.

From 13 October, Microsoft 365 subscribers will no longer be able to open or edit Publisher files, and the app will disappear from the 365 suite entirely. The last perpetual (non-subscription) version of Publisher came with Office 2021. So, if you own this (or an earlier) version, you'll still be able to run it after October, but you'll be doing so without security fixes, leaving you vulnerable to malware.

Office 2021 users can switch to the free office suites LibreOffice (www.libreoffice.org) and OnlyOffice (www.onlyoffice.com), but neither has a Publisher replacement. Instead, use Affinity (www.snipca.com/57002), a brilliant creative suite that's now completely free, having previously cost £60 (see Workshop on page 38). It includes a brilliant desktop-publishing component (also called Publisher), which you'll find in the Layout tab (see screenshot above).



Switch to Affinity's free Publisher when Microsoft scraps its tool of the same name

Belkin Wemo smart-home devices

In July, Belkin announced that, from 31 January 2026, it would be shutting its Wemo cloud service and terminating support for dozens of smart plugs, switches and motion-sensor devices. If you own any Wemo products, this means you could lose key features, including remote control and all Alexa/Google Home support. A small handful of Wemo devices will continue to work normally – check at www.snipca.com/57043.

If your Wemo product is still under warranty, you may be eligible for a partial refund. If not, Belkin's somewhat unhelpful advice is to take your devices to "an authorised e-waste recycling centre".

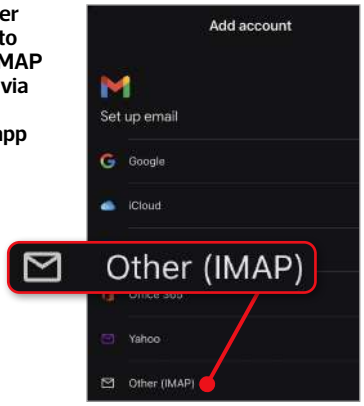
If you're looking for sensibly priced replacements that will last longer, try TP-Link's Tapo range (www.snipca.com/57070). You can control them all using the Tapo Smart HomeBase H500 (£120 from www.snipca.com/56380, see our review in Issue 720, page 26).

Gmailify & POP in Gmail

Google is ending support for two features that let you send and receive mail from other accounts within Gmail: POP retrieval (which fetches messages from another provider via POP3) and Gmailify, which links certain non-Google mail accounts, such as Yahoo Mail and Outlook, so you can manage them within Gmail while keeping your original address. Both rely on creaky old internet technology. Google will start phasing out support in January (www.snipca.com/57044).

Check whether you're affected by logging into Gmail and navigating to Settings, 'See all settings', 'Accounts and Import', then looking under 'Check mail from other accounts'. If you've already linked a third-party account via Gmailify, you may be able to continue sending and receiving messages – for now. But you'll lose many of Gmail's enhanced features, including spam filtering and inbox sorting. If you use POP retrieval, Gmail will simply stop fetching messages from your non-Google account.

From January, if you want to access



Tap 'Other (IMAP)' to add an IMAP account via Gmail's mobile app

third-party mail in Gmail, you have two options. You can add your account with IMAP using the Gmail mobile app (Android or iOS) by tapping your user icon and selecting 'Add account' then tapping 'Other (IMAP)' – see screenshot above. Or you can enable forwarding from within your non-Google account so new messages are sent directly to Gmail.

Windows 11 SE

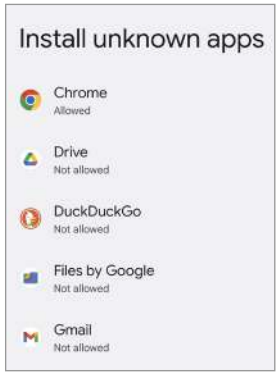
Launched in 2021, Windows 11 SE is a simplified edition of Microsoft's current operating system, designed to run on lower-powered computers and aimed at schools and colleges. In mid-2025, Microsoft quietly announced it would be ending support for SE in October 2026 (www.snipca.com/57046). It simply recommends "transitioning to a device that supports another edition of Windows 11". It's the first full edition of Windows 11 that has been discontinued – and a reminder that nothing's safe from Microsoft's axe.

What will *probably* stop working

Sideloading on Android

One of Android's key strengths has been the freedom to sideload apps from any source (once you've tapped Settings, Apps, 'Special app access', then activated 'Install unknown apps' – see screenshot below). But from September 2026, devices in several regions (including Brazil, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand) will begin actively blocking apps from unverified Android app developers, even if their apps are listed on unofficial stores (ie, not the Play Store).

Google says this will help to block illegal and dodgy apps, but critics say it removes the freedom of users to install apps that perform tasks Google might not approve of, such as blocking adverts. In response, Google has said it will introduce a system that lets "experienced users accept the risks of installing software that isn't verified". Many people who currently sideload would already consider themselves experienced, so in effect little might change.



Google might make it harder to sideload Android apps in 2026

Windows 10 (again)

When Windows 10 reached its official end of support in October 2025, millions of users who couldn't upgrade to Windows 11 were thrown a last-minute lifeline in the shape of Microsoft's Extended Security Updates (ESU). But that grace period ends in October 2026, at which point Windows 10 will finally be put to rest for good – unless, of course, Microsoft performs another surprise U-turn between now and then.

It's risky to rely on another stay of execution, so if your PC isn't compatible with Windows 11, you'll need to consider buying a new computer before October – or switching to Linux (see page 35). If you're determined to keep using your old Windows 10 PC beyond then, read our recommendations for using it as safely as possible in Issue 723 (page 60).

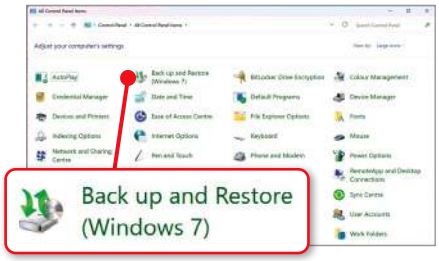
What we'd like to see axed in 2026

Windows Control Panel

Windows 11 is packed with modern, streamlined tools. Yet deep in its underbelly lurk clunky, decades-old utilities that feel like they're from another age. We may well love them for their familiarity, but do they *really* belong in a 2026 operating system?

Take 'Backup & Restore (Windows 7)' (see screenshot) – a tool so old its name still references an operating system that Microsoft ended support for in 2020. We appreciate that Windows still includes a system-image backup too, but the feature is desperately in need of an update.

Disk Clean-up is another fossil from Windows' past: excellent in its day, but now superseded by the sleeker Storage Sense (in Settings, System, Storage). Or how about Steps Recorder? A clunky relic no one needs now that Snipping Tool includes proper screen recording.



So we think the Control Panel (pictured) and its bundle of XP-era tools are long overdue retirement. Given Microsoft's enthusiasm for axing 'legacy' Windows features in recent years (think WordPad, Internet Explorer, Windows Media Centre), we reckon its days are numbered.

What will *possibly* stop working

Amazon Alexa

Amazon's new range of smart speakers can work with its AI-powered voice assistant Alexa+, including the latest Echo Show 8 (reviewed on page 29). So we think it could be curtains for the old Alexa. Amazon will release software updates for some older smart speakers so they can work with Alexa+, but it's abandoning *really* old model Echo models such as the 1st-generation Echo (pictured right), Echo Dot and Echo Plus (scroll to 'Frequently asked questions' at www.snipca.com/57052). While there's no formal end-of-life announced for the old Alexa yet, it's surely a matter of time before Amazon kills it off.

The first-generation Echo will never get Alexa+

Older Fitbit devices

Since buying Fitbit in 2021 Google has been axing devices from its lineup. This could continue next year, with pre-Google devices such as 2018's Fitbit Ionic looking vulnerable. Google has already shut down several Fitbit features in recent years (including Challenges and Adventures), and its Legacy Device Policy (www.snipca.com/57053) openly states that older devices will "eventually" lose support, software updates – and even the ability to pair with the Fitbit app. ca

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

Can I connect to multiple Bluetooth speakers?

Q I have digitised all my vinyl records. I keep the audio files on my computer and play them through a Bluetooth speaker placed next to it. My wife would also like to hear the music from a different room. Is it possible to connect to two speakers in different rooms to Bluetooth so we can both listen at the same time? Love your magazine, incidentally!

Philip Johns

JBL's Go 4 speakers support Auracast, but you need a compatible broadcast device

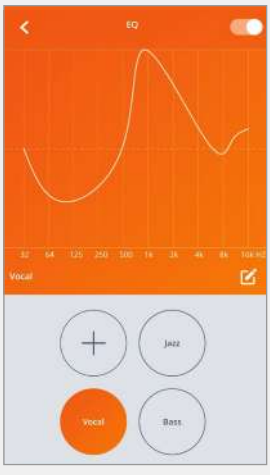
A Yes, it's possible, but almost certainly not with your existing equipment. To understand why, we need to explain some of the background details.

The original Bluetooth standard was designed for one-to-one connectivity. With audio, that means one device streams and another receives, which is your current setup. Remarkably, while the Bluetooth standard has been updated many times over the years, this particular limitation has remained the status quo for decades.

A couple of years ago, the Bluetooth Special Interest Group (www.bluetooth.com) – the industry body responsible for the standard – introduced Bluetooth Low Energy (LE) Audio. Among its improvement is a feature called Auracast, which allows one-to-many streaming, so one device can broadcast to multiple speakers simultaneously.

Auracast-compatible devices are now beginning to appear, such as the JBL Go 4 portable speaker (around £40, www.snipca.com/56735, pictured above right). Even so, it's not simply a matter of buying two new speakers. The transmitting device must also support Bluetooth LE Audio and Auracast.

If your PC or Bluetooth adapter is more than about a year old, it almost certainly won't support LE Audio, and support remains limited even among new adapters and computers. The same applies to smartphones and tablets, whether Apple iOS or Android. That's likely to change over time, but for now LE Audio compatibility – and therefore Auracast functionality – is far from widespread. Auracast-capable Bluetooth LE Audio USB adapters exist, but while Windows 11 already supports LE Audio, the Auracast features are still under development, so that part of any dongle is currently out of use. The same applies to Apple devices and most Android models.



JBL's app only works on compatible JBL devices

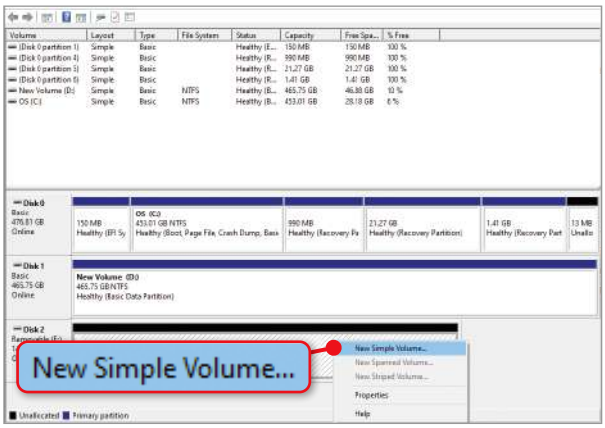
In the meantime, some manufacturers developed their own solutions. JBL's PartyBoost feature, for example, lets you connect multiple compatible JBL speakers to a single audio source via the JBL app (www.snipca.com/56737, see screenshot left). However, the app is available only for iOS and Android devices, so it wouldn't help you broadcast from your PC. What's more, manufacturers are gradually moving away from their own systems as they adopt Bluetooth LE Audio and Auracast, so tying yourself to JBL's platform now would be a mistake.

The upshot is that what you want is possible but only if you buy manufacturers' own systems, which we wouldn't recommend. Thankfully, the situation is improving, and by this time next year Auracast-compatible dongles and speakers will undoubtedly be much more mainstream.

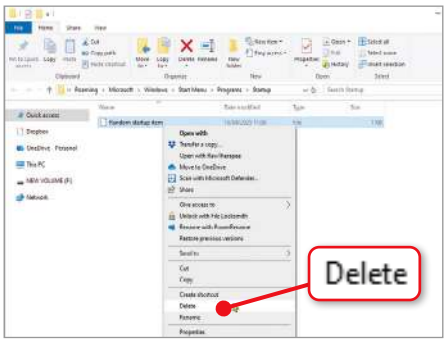
Why can't I create a recovery drive?

Q I'm having trouble creating a recovery drive. When I get to the point where I have to insert my 32GB USB stick, the Next button is greyed out, and then the process starts again. Also, when I restart my PC I get a message that says "Windows cannot find '(null)'".

Dave Rhodes



In Disk Manager, right-click the Unallocated space and select New Simple Volume



Open the Run box and type shell:startup, then delete any startup items you don't want

A There are two separate issues here, so we'll deal with them one at a time.

First, when creating a recovery drive, you need to ensure that your USB stick is empty and ready for the Recovery Drive tool to use. To set it up correctly, right-click it in File Explorer and choose Format, then select either select FAT32 or NTFS (either is fine) before clicking Start.

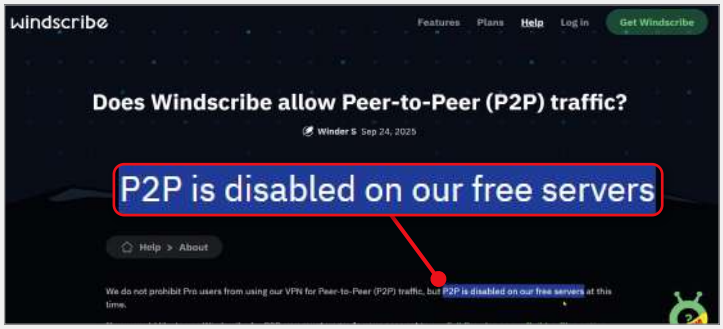
If that doesn't work, or you can't see the USB stick in File Explorer, you may need to use a different Windows tool to prepare it. First press Windows key+X to open the Quick Link menu, then choose Disk Management. In Disk Manager, find the entry for your USB stick. You'll recognise it by its size, although if your PC has only one hard drive or SSD, it'll probably be 'Disk 1'. Then right-click the space labelled 'Unallocated' and choose New Simple Volume (see screenshot above). Follow the instructions to allocate the drive's full capacity to this partition, then assign it a drive letter. Finally, try to create your recovery drive again.

Now for your second problem. The message "Windows cannot find '(null)'" usually means you have a startup shortcut pointing to something that no longer exists. First, right-click a blank part of the Windows taskbar then choose Task Manager. Open the Startup tab and look for any entries that might be causing the problem, then right-click them and choose Disable. Next, press Windows key+R to open a Run box then type shell:startup and press Enter. Delete or move anything you don't want to launch at startup (see screenshot above). Now restart your PC.

Why won't Windscribe work with BitTorrent?

Q For years I've been using qBitTorrent for downloads, connecting one or other of my two laptops through Windscribe's free VPN service to protect my privacy. Recently this stopped working on both laptops. I've tried almost every fix I can find online, but nothing has helped. As an experiment, I briefly switched off Windscribe and my torrents resumed, so I'm sure Windscribe is the culprit. What's the problem here, and how do I fix it?

Ian Travis


windscribe
Features
Plans
Help
Log in
Get Windscribe
Does Windscribe allow Peer-to-Peer (P2P) traffic?
Winder S Sep 24, 2025
P2P is disabled on our free servers
Help > About
We do not prohibit Pro users from using our VPN for Peer-to-Peer (P2P) traffic, but P2P is disabled on our free servers at this time.

Windscribe has blocked peer-to-peer traffic on its free VPN service

A The problem is that Windscribe has made a business decision to block peer-to-peer (P2P) traffic on its free servers. In other words, unless you pay for your VPN service, you can no longer use Windscribe for BitTorrent. The company hasn't exactly shouted about this new restriction from the rooftops but it did post an explanation on its website, at www.snipca.com/56738 (see screenshot above).

That's literally all there is to it, so you won't find a fix for your problem as such. If you want to stick with Windscribe, your only option is to pay for its service (prices start at $3 – around £2.25 – a month, www.windscribe.com/upgrade).

Alternatively, you can switch to a different VPN provider. There aren't many truly free options available, but a good one is PrivadoVPN (www.privadovpn.com). Like Windscribe, this offers up to 10GB of bandwidth a month free, and for now at least this still allows use of P2P services such as BitTorrent.

Should I pay to recover my files?

Q My Seagate USB hard drive has developed a fault, and Windows won't read it. I found a program called Wondershare Recoverit that has identified lots of files on the drive and claims it can recover them. Will this work? I'd have to buy a licence to use it.

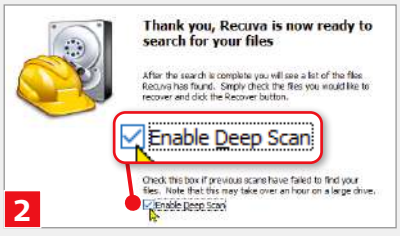
Dave Trickett

A Wondershare Recoverit may well do the job, but there's really no need to pay for it or any other app. That's because the free version of Recuva (www.ccleaner.com/recuva) can recover files from a corrupted or faulty drive using similar methods.

Once you've installed Recuva, launch it and select 'All Files' (see screenshot 1 below) followed by Next. Choose 'In a specific location', then click Browse and point the program to your Seagate drive. Tick the Enable Deep Scan box 2. and click Start.

When the scan is complete, Recuva will highlight any files it can recover intact in green. Tick those you want to rescue, then click Recover and opt to save them somewhere other than the faulty drive, such as your PC's internal drive or a different USB drive.

Open Recuva and select All Files to find any recoverable files on your hard drive



Tick to Enable Deep Scan – it takes longer, but is much more thorough

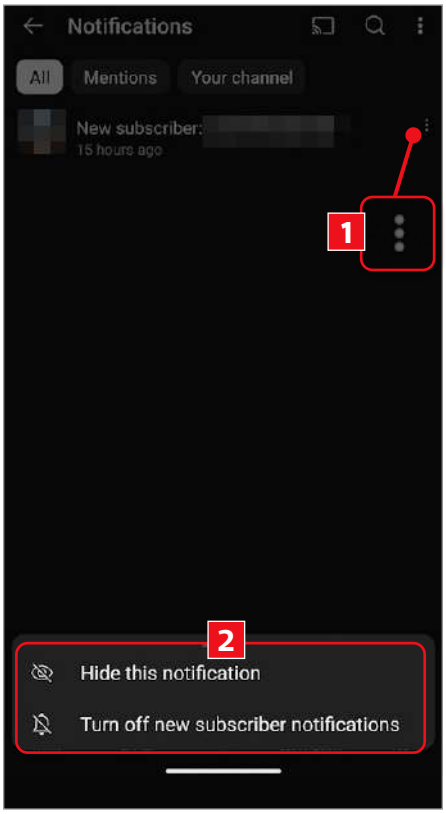
How do I remove this dot on YouTube?

Q Recently, a blue dot appeared on the YouTube app icon on my Android phone. I think it means I have a notification. However, I can't find any notifications in the app or even see where they might be. I find the dot very distracting, because I keep YouTube in a folder on my home screen, and now that folder has a permanent blue dot too. I don't object to YouTube sending me notifications, but this dot is infuriating me. How do I get rid of it?

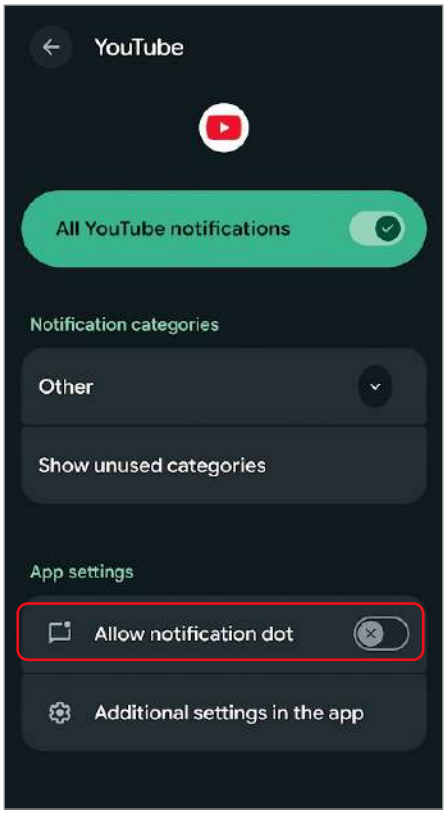
Mark Elden

A You're right that the blue dot indicates a notification. You can access YouTube's notification area by opening the app and clicking the bell icon at the top. This is where you'll find any new notifications. From here you can tap the menu icon (three dots – 1 in our screenshot below left) next to any notification to hide it or turn off particular notification types 2.

If that doesn't work, you can disable the blue-dot notification indicator completely – either for all apps or just specific ones such as YouTube. Launch the Android Settings app then tap Notifications followed by 'App notifications'. Now find and tap the entry for YouTube. Finally, under the 'App settings' heading, switch off the 'Allow notification dot' slider (see screenshot below).



Tap the menu icon next to a notification for options to hide it or disable new notifications



Switch this off in Android's Settings app to disable blue dots for YouTube notifications

Q: Can I buy a Wi-Fi 6 router with a SIM slot?

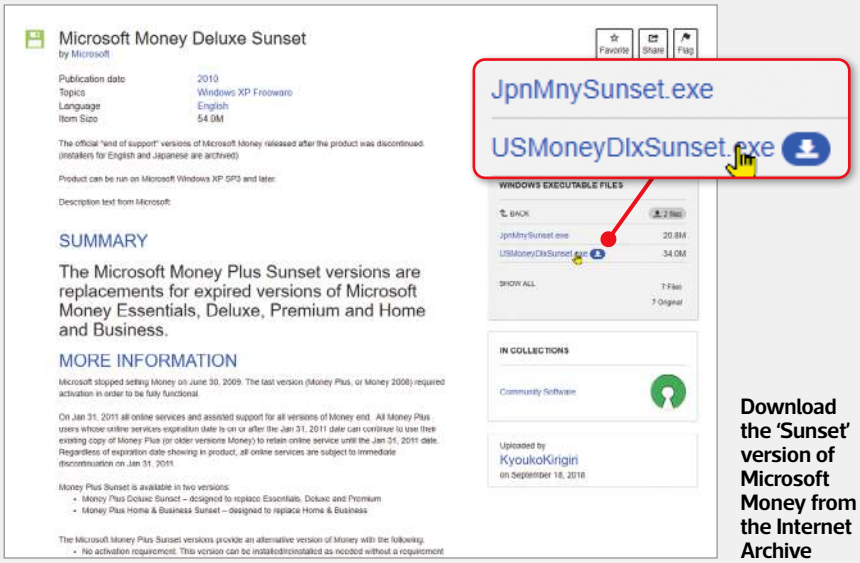
A: Issue 691, page 64 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

Can I recover my scrambled Microsoft Money backups?

Q I used Microsoft Money on my Windows 10 laptop for years and found it very helpful. When the time came to buy a new laptop, I backed up my Money accounts to my external hard drive thinking I'd be able access them on my new computer. Unfortunately, when I opened the files they were all just gobbledegook. I haven't got the original Money CD, so does that mean I've lost my data forever? I greatly miss Money!

Steven Dack



Download the 'Sunset' version of Microsoft Money from the Internet Archive

A You're certainly not alone here. We receive a lot of questions about getting old software up and running, and we probably receive more Money-related emails than anything else. People loved it, and they still do, even though Microsoft wrote it off nearly two decades ago, and all support has now ended.

All is not lost, however. At the end of the product's life the company released what it called a 'Sunset' edition, which enabled users to view and manipulate their data but disabled all the online options. This version can still open Money backup files, which have a .mbf file extension, as well as standard data files, ending in .mny, and has proved a life-saver for many Money devotees.

The trouble is that, even though this version works in both Windows 10 and 11 – albeit with a few bugs – Microsoft no longer offers it for download. This means the only way to obtain it is unofficially, through the Internet Archive website, at www.snipca.com/56739 (see screenshot). We've written about the Internet Archive in these pages many times, and the fact that companies including Microsoft turn a blind eye to old tools that are hosted there means there's really little risk in downloading it from there. Once you've installed the program, you can recover your files by opening the File menu and choosing Restore Backup, then following the prompts.

Am I allowed to move my optical network terminal box?

Q I'd like to move my Openreach optical network terminal (ONT) box about 45cm along the wall. I wouldn't need to open the box at all, but moving it would leave me with too much fibre-optic cable. Could I just coil up the excess cable and clip it to the wall? I realise I can't cut it.

Neil Howells

A Strictly speaking, you're not supposed to touch the ONT. It belongs to Openreach and should only be serviced by one of its appointed technicians, which is likely to cost north of £100.

Having said that, what you want to do should be pretty easy, but you'll have to work carefully. The thin fibre cable with the green connector (pictured) is extremely delicate. If you bend or twist it too sharply, you'll break your incoming broadband connection and can expect an awkward telephone call with your provider's customer-service team.

From the image you sent, we think your particular ONT model will be fixed to the wall with a screwed backplate, so it should simply lift up and off – though check carefully for a securing clip or latch. Once it's free, unscrew the plate from the wall and reattach it in the new position.

You can coil any spare fibre gently into a loop, but don't make it too tight – think the size of a saucer, rather than a golf ball. Finally, hang the ONT back on its plate, plug everything back in, then sit back and think of the money you've saved.

If you need to unplug your ONT, be careful not to damage the delicate fibre-optic cable

What should I do about this scary Secure Boot warning?

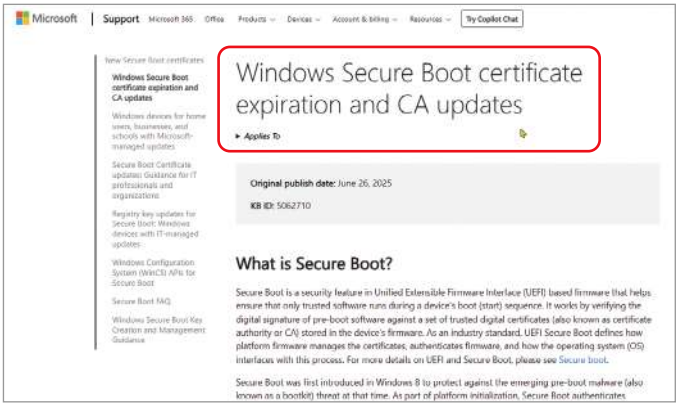
Q As an everyday PC user, I often find myself trying to advise others on upgrading to Windows 11 and so on. I enjoy reading *Computeractive* because it helps me keep up to date with important issues. Recently, while reading about my own Windows setup online, I found an article suggesting that Secure Boot certificates will expire in June 2026 and that PCs might not be able to boot securely. It said to review the guidance and take action. Do I need to do anything about this?

John Forrest

A The wording of the Microsoft page we believe you're talking about (www.snipca.com/56740, pictured below left) certainly sounds alarming. However, we're glad to report that, for most domestic users, there's nothing to worry about and nothing you have to do.

These certificates are part of the Windows Secure Boot system, which checks certain startup files for signs of tampering. They have a built-in expiry date, which is fast approaching, so they need to be renewed.

The advice you found is aimed at IT administrators. The guidance referred to in the article is information Microsoft provides to organisations that manage updates for large numbers of computers. The advice for consumer users like you is on a different part of the Microsoft website, at www.snipca.com/56741 (see screenshot below right). This makes it much clearer that most users won't need to take action, because Microsoft will issue new certificates through the usual Windows Update system.



Organisations with many PCs will need to update their boot certificates

Where can I learn more about Secure Boot and the certificate update?
See the article Secure boot to learn more about its technical details. To stay up to date on the certificate update rollout, check the release notes for Windows updates available on the Windows 11, version 24H2 update history and Windows 10 update history pages.
In most cases, nothing!
What do I need to do?
In most cases, nothing! Just make sure that:
Your device is running a supported version of Windows 10 or Windows 11.

...but Microsoft will take care of the update for ordinary PC users

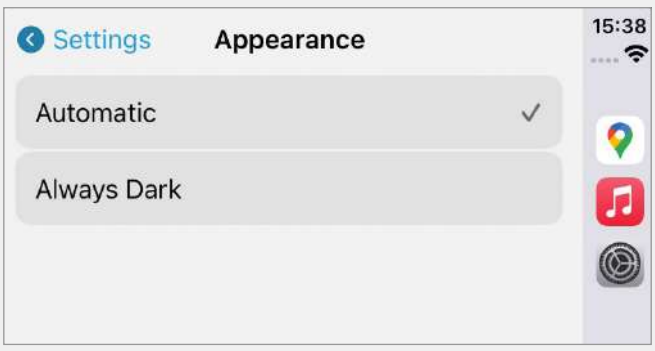
Can I keep my driving maps dark?

Q I've recently started using Apple CarPlay in my new car. I've noticed that the map switches colour depending on whether the headlights are on or off – I get a light map when they're off, and a dark one when they're on. I prefer the dark map and would like to use this during the day, too. Is there any way to make that happen? I've looked through my iPhone's settings and can't see anything.

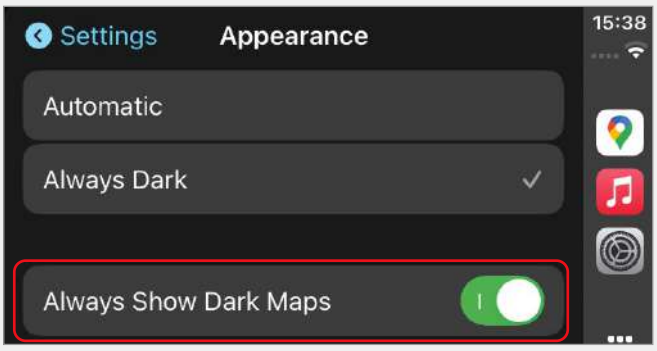
Graham Lewis

A Yes, though the option's a little tucked away. CarPlay usually switches between its light and dark modes automatically, depending on signals it receives from the car – typically whether the headlights are on or off. The reasonable assumption is that you need a brighter map during the day and a darker one at night.

You can override this behaviour, but you do it on your vehicle's CarPlay screen, not your iPhone. The next time your car and your phone are connected, go to your car's display and tap the Settings icon followed by Appearance – you'll see that Automatic is ticked by default (see screenshot below left). Next, tap to tick the Always Dark option. This makes a new option appear: Always Show Dark Maps (see screenshot below). Tap to switch on this slider, and your maps will use dark mode at all times.



In your car's CarPlay's settings, change Appearance to Always Dark...



...then switch on the Always Show Dark Maps slider

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Ebook formats?

Credit: perfectocapucinepexels.com

Ebooks are awash with incompatible formats

Q Having recently down-sized to a retirement bungalow, I'm thinking of buying an ebook reader to save shelf space. There's a lot of choice and I'm confused by all the ebook formats, such as EPUB, MOBI, AZW and so on. What are the differences? Which is best? Can I buy one device to read them all?

Tom Rathbone

A The ebook world is awash with different formats, and this can be confusing. Each device and format has its pros and cons. There isn't a single 'best' choice as such, but there are certainly better or worse options depending on your needs.

The main formats you'll meet are EPUB, MOBI, AZW and KFX. Of these, EPUB is the most widely used because it's an open standard supported by most non-Kindle readers. MOBI is more or less obsolete. It was developed by a company called Mobipocket, but Amazon bought it and turned the format into AZW. This remains a key format for Amazon's Kindle readers, along with the newer KFX, which adds more typesetting features.

When you buy a Kindle ebook from Amazon, it's typically an AZW or KFX file protected by digital-rights management (DRM). This locks the file to your Kindle device and any Amazon apps signed in to your account. Modern Kindles can also display ordinary EPUB files. You can transfer these and other document file types, such as PDF, to your device using Amazon's Send to Kindle service, at www.amazon.co.uk/sendtokindle.

Other popular readers such as Kobo and Nook can also handle DRM-free EPUBs, but they can't open AZW or KFX files. What's more, books from the Kobo store (www.kobo.com) or Barnes & Noble's Nook store (www.bn.com) often come as EPUB files 'wrapped' in Adobe Digital Editions DRM (ADE EPUB). These will open only on devices or apps signed in to the same account, and none of the devices can handle each other's proprietary ebooks.

So EPUB files are the most flexible because most ebook readers support them. Amazon's ebook store probably has the widest library, but books are largely protected by DRM. It's DRM that dictates how and where you can read your ebooks.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Why does my TV black out when watching Freeview

Q A couple of years ago, I bought a TCL 50RP620K Roku 50in TV, as recommended in your magazine. I've been generally pleased with it but sometimes the screen blacks out for a few seconds and then returns to normal. This happens only when I'm watching Freeview channels, not when streaming through apps like iPlayer and ITVX. After reading an item in your magazine about 5G interfering with TV signals I fitted a filter from Restore TV (https://restoretv.uk), but this made no difference. I've gone through the TV's settings, but can't find anything that will rectify the problem. Any ideas?

John Lamb

A The fact that this doesn't affect streamed content tells us this is not a problem with the screen but with your Freeview signal, either from the tuner or your rooftop aerial.

Check Ofcom's transmitter guide to find out which direction your TV antenna should point

As the signal has been fine in the past, you can assume your aerial is probably working, but it's worth checking. Strong winds may have nudged it out of alignment with your local transmitter, or a bird might have made a nest on its elements (or tines). If you're not sure which direction it should point, look at other aerials on nearby rooftops, or refer to Ofcom's transmitter maps, at www.snipca.com/56736 (see screenshot). Also check the cable from your wall aerial socket to the back of the TV to make sure it hasn't come loose.

If everything looks in order, check that your set's firmware is up to date. From the Settings screen, navigate to Updates then 'System update'. If that doesn't fix the problem, it's probably a fault with the set's Freeview tuner component. TCL offers a repair service, so get in touch with the company at www.tcl.com.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 17 Dec

- Can I get a mobile connection for my Fire Stick?
- How I do report phishing to Microsoft?
- Why am I getting these Intel alerts? ...And many more

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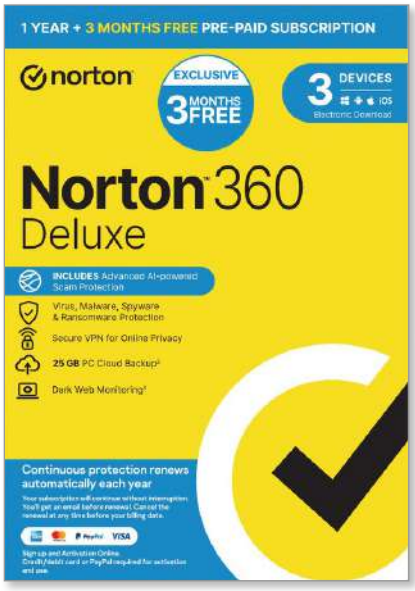

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

3 devices for 15 months NOW ONLY £9.99*

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Buy it from our Software Store at www.snipca.com/56927

*while stocks last

Problems Solved

Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Why can't I install 0patch's Windows 10 updates?

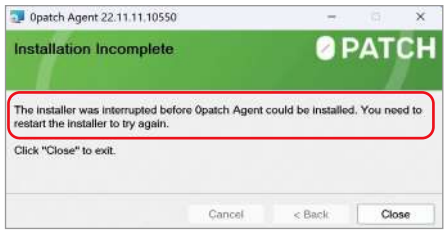
Q I'm 90 and want my six-year-old Windows 10 PC to last me out. Following your advice I subscribed to 0patch (https://0patch.com) and then tried to download '0patch Agent 22.11.11.10550' several times. But I keep getting stuck with the message, 'Installation incomplete. The Installation was interrupted...'. I've contacted 0patch's support for help, but all I'm told is to read the Article '0patch Agent fails to install, see No. 7'. I'm worried 0patch might be a scam. Can you reassure me?

Bob Coleman

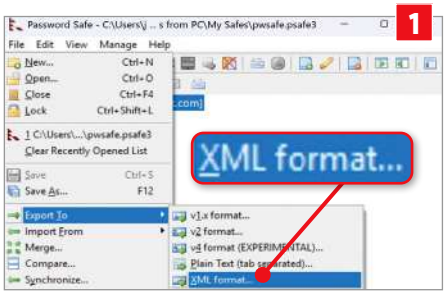
A First, rest assured that 0patch definitely isn't a scam. It's run by Acros Security, a reputable Slovenian company. We've installed it successfully on several PCs and it's a very reliable, cost-effective way to keep using Windows 10.

However, we were able to replicate your installation error on a computer with an ARM processor (see screenshot below) – and checking 0patch's troubleshooting pages (www.snipca.com/56888) confirms that it doesn't support that chip. Check whether your PC has an ARM processor by clicking Start, Settings, System, then About and looking under Processor.

We should have mentioned 0patch's requirements in our original article, so please accept our apologies. If you've already paid for 0patch, you should be able to cancel your subscription and request a refund – see www.snipca.com/56889.


0patch Agent 22.11.11.10550
Installation Incomplete
PATCH
The installer was interrupted before 0patch Agent could be installed. You need to restart the installer to try again.
Click "Close" to exit.
Cancel
< Back
Close

You'll see this error if you try to install 0patch on a PC running with an ARM processor



Export your logins from Password Safe by clicking File, 'Export to' then 'XML format'...

Is my password manager still safe to use?

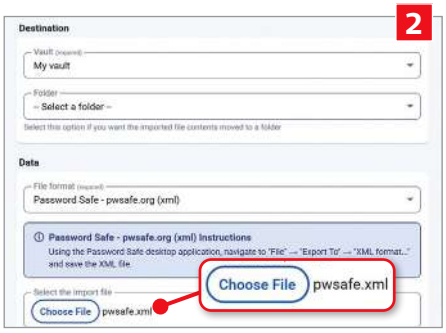
Q In Issue 720's Cover Feature you recommended several password managers, but made no mention of the one I use: Password Safe (https://pwsafe.org). I believe you recommended it many years ago, and it suits my needs. However, because you didn't mention it I'm wondering whether it's still safe to use. Can you confirm one way or another?

Steve Newton

A We didn't mention Password Safe in our Cover Feature because it's getting a little long in the tooth, and hasn't had a significant update in many years. It still works fine, but it lacks many features you'll find in most other modern password managers. There's no browser extension, for example.

You can carry on using Password Safe, but our recommendation would be to switch to our Gold Award winner, Bitwarden (www.snipca.com/56329) – or one of our runners-up, Proton Pass (www.snipca.com/56334) or NordPass (www.nordpass.com). If you decide to try one of them, you can export your existing logins from Password Safe and import them into your new password manager.

To migrate your logins to Bitwarden, for example, open Password Safe and click File, 'Export to', then 'XML format' (see screenshot 1 above) and follow the prompts. Next, launch Bitwarden and click File, 'Import data'. Now select 'Password Safe - pwsafe.org (xml)' from the 'File format' dropdown menu, then click Choose File and browse for the XML file you exported from Password Safe 2. Click 'Import data'.



...then open Bitwarden, click File, 'Import data', select Password Safe and navigate to your exported XML file

Why can't you use Winux as your main operating system?

Q I've just read Issue 720's 'Easy When You Know How' (page 74) in which Robert Irvine upgraded his unsupported Windows 10 laptop with Winux (www.snipca.com/56309). My interest was sparked as I recently installed Linux Mint on a spare laptop. It ran great but I found it hard to use. I then tried Zorin and found it almost too easy to get into.

Thus your article on Winux intrigued me and I'm considering whether to install it myself. However, Robert ended his column by saying Winux shouldn't be used as your main operating system. Can you clarify why that is?

Alan Wood

A Winux is a very clever Linux clone of Windows 11, but we have our reservations, as Robert mentioned in his column. Our biggest gripe is that, while the distro itself is free, you need to pay (around £26) for a PowerTools licence, in order to unlock some options to customise it. Plus there's no security beyond a basic firewall. And, since it's not an official Windows product, there's always the possibility Microsoft might try to have it shut down.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

Add-in Microsoft's name for tools that can be added to Office software.

AES-256bit A form of encryption based on a key length of 256 bits.

API key Unique code identifying and authorising a user or app.

ARM Processors that are more energy-efficient than those made by AMD and Intel.

Augmented reality Lets you view the real world on a screen and add virtual elements.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Benchmarking Comparing hardware and software with an accepted standard.

Beta Software that's being tested.

BIOS Software built into every PC that connects vital components.

BitTorrent A technology for downloading large files quickly.

Bloatware Unwanted software built into a new device.

Buffering Downloading a certain amount of data before starting to play a video.

Captcha Distorted text you have to type to prove you're a human.

Cast To send content from your PC or mobile device to a TV.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot An AI program that recreates conversation with humans.

Command line A way to control a PC by typing instructions.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CPU Another term for a processor.

CR2025/CR2032 Small, round cell batteries used in smaller devices.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

Defragment Reorganise data on a hard drive so it can be accessed quickly.

DIMM An older standard for computer memory modules.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

DNS Associates computers with their addresses on the internet.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound technology that adds 'height' to audio.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

DRM Software that limits the copying of a file.

ECG Electrocardiogram. Tests your heart's rhythm using sensors.

Efficiency core Processors used for background tasks.

Encode Convert media files to a new format.

Encryption key A random string of characters used to encrypt and decrypt sensitive data.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so only the sender and recipient can read them.

eSATA External Sata. A type of connection for external hard drives.

eSIM A virtual SIM card.

Ethernet A standard used for most wired computer networks.

FAST Free Ad-Supported Streaming Television.

FAT32 An old system used for formatting hard drives.

Fingerprinting A tracking method used by websites to identify you from your device and software.

Firewall Prevents unauthorised access to a PC over a network.

Frame generation Technology that creates extra video frames for smoother motion.

Frame rate The number of stills or frames, shown per second (**Fps**) to create a moving image.

Full HD 1920x1080 pixels.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second.

Gigabit Ethernet Networking standard of up to 1,000Mbps.

GPU A chip designed to create 3D graphics.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI Connection that transmits HD video and audio signals.

HEVC Video-compression standard that offers a good quality of picture but with more compression.

HTTPS The secure version of HTTP, the technology that sends data between your browser and the web.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens:

IMAP A method for email that lets the user manage messages stored on a remote server.

IP address Used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IP42 Device rating for limited water and dust protection.

JPEG A common type of image file created by digital cameras.

Layers Image-editors let users create multiple layers, which can be drawn on, re-ordered or hidden.

LED Electronic device that emits light.

LibVLC Software library that plays audio and video files.

Lightning connector Apple's own connector.

LTPO Screen technology that saves battery by adjusting refresh rate.

M.2 A specification for internal PC expansion cards and connectors.

mAh The higher the mAh, the longer a battery will last.

Manifest V2 Chrome's specifications for browser extensions.

Matter Open-source standard for smart-home devices.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroSD card Type of memory card.

MicroUSB Miniature version of USB.

Mini DisplayPort A type of port for connecting a monitor to a PC.

MVNO A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network.

NAS A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared.

Noise Visible dust-like speckles in some camera and TV images.

NTFS A file system used by all recent versions of Windows.

NVMe An interface that lets solid-state drives work faster.

OCR The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

OLED An organic light-emitting diode used in PC and TV screens.

ONT Installed at your home as part of a FTTP broadband service.

Overclock Make a processor work faster to boost performance.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition.

PCIe A faster version of PCI – a slot on the motherboard for expansion cards.

Performance core Processors designed for heavy-duty PC work.

Picture-in-picture Shows video in a small moveable screen.

Plain text Text in a document that doesn't contain formatting.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to software.

PNG A format for images that shrinks file sizes using compression.

POP3 A system for remotely accessing email from an ISP.

PUP Potentially unwanted program.

RAM The computer's working area.

Read speed How long it takes a hard drive to 'read' data, and respond to it.

Recovery drive USB drive used to restore or fix Windows.

Refresh rate The number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn (in Hz).

RGB keyboard Advanced type of LED backlit keyboard.

RTF A file format used to transfer files between programs.

Script A program stored on a web server to control part of a website.

Sideload To install apps without using the official Android store.

SIM The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

Spatial audio A form of digital surround-sound.

SSD Solid-state drive.

System image A backup of your operating system drivers, PC settings, programs and files.

System restore point System files stored at a given time to which Windows can revert.

Tag A keyword used to describe a file or web page.

Temporary file Created by sites to store info for a specific purpose.

Tethering Turning a phone into a modem to give web access to a PC.

Thread Smallest sequence of instructions that can be managed by your processor.

Thunderbolt A very fast port for connecting external storage to a PC.

TIF A standard file format used to store graphics images.

Torrent A file that can be downloaded using BitTorrent software.

UEFI A modern replacement for the BIOS.

Upscale Creating a larger version of a photo without sacrificing detail.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

Vector illustration Graphics that can be enlarged to any scale without a loss of quality.

VPN Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

WEBM Video file format supported by major browsers and software.

Wi-Fi 5 A standard for wireless with much higher transfer speeds than 802.11n.

Wi-Fi 6 Up to 10 times faster than 802.11ac. Also called 802.11ax.

Wi-Fi 7 Faster successor to Wi-Fi 6, with speed of around 46Gbps.

Widget A small program that runs on the Windows desktop.

x86 A set of instructions that controls how a processor works.

Zigbee Low-power wireless system connecting smart home devices.

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Know How

Fed up with plugging the wrong portable drive into his PC, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Add labels to his USB sticks

Because it's been years since I lived in a shared student house, I don't generally need to label my personal belongings or food. But the recent discussion in our Readers' Tips section about the best way to label USB sticks gave me pause for thought.

I often insert the wrong device when I need to copy files to my PC or boot a portable operating system, which wastes valuable working time. It's not helped by the fact that I have two SanDisk USB sticks that look exactly the same.

To solve this problem, I decided to buy a label maker and stick physical labels to my portable drives. I found a suitable device on Amazon called the Supvan E11 Bluetooth Label Maker Machine (www.snipca.com/56974, pictured right). Reduced from £39.99 to £24.99 when I bought it, this has both a physical keyboard and a mobile app (hence the Bluetooth), to give you two ways to create labels.

Unlike some of the cheap gadgets I've bought from Amazon, the Supvan E11 arrived in a box that matched its name, with an informative user manual written in plain English (and presumably plain German). I noticed it was made by a Chinese company called Katasymbol, but I doubt Beijing has much interest in my labels.

The label maker resembles an overweight scientific calculator and felt a bit plasticky and cheap, but this also made it light to hold. I turned it on and

Robert can now tell the difference between these USB sticks

Robert used the Supvan E11 to print text labels at his desired size

> "The label maker resembles an overweight scientific calculator"

was politely asked to 'Please install tape'. After briefly fretting that I'd forgotten to buy tape, I realised – as the manual made clear – it was already inside the device. I opened the case, removed the roll of tape, peeled off the protective label then put it back in, with the end sticking out of the 'paper exit'.

The Supvan E11 now displayed its text- entry screen. Annoyingly, it had no backlight, but I could see enough to create a test label. I typed HELLO, pressed the Print button (1 in our photo above) and set 'Repeat print' to '1'. The device made a grinding noise and quickly printed my first label.

The text was very clear, but far too large for a USB stick. I pressed the 'AAA' button to shrink it to the '2' size setting (out of 11), then printed again. This time the text was too small so I selected '4', which was ideal.

I was now ready to create a label for a USB stick. I gave it the imaginative title DOCS 2, printed it and cut it down to size with a pair of scissors. I then peeled off the backing from the tape and stuck the label on the stick – at a slightly wonky angle (see photo below left).

So far so good, but the Supvan E11 was rather clunky to use and the lack of backlight was frustrating. So I installed Katasymbol's Android app (www.snipca.com/56964) on my phone (it's also available for iOS: www.snipca.com/56965) and connected the devices via Bluetooth.

I pressed New Label followed by Text and typed my new label of PICS. The app made it much easier to resize and realign the text, with other options for bold, italics, underline and changing the font. I tapped 'Print' when done and the label almost instantly popped out of the label maker. It took a few tries to get the right size (the app doesn't use the same numbering system), but I was impressed by the printing speed.

I can now label other objects in my home that give me more space to elaborate than my tiny USB sticks. If the lack of backlight isn't a dealbreaker, I reckon the Supvan E11 makes a great Christmas present, like those I recommend on page 62.

Need help managing your USB sticks? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to convert big files online

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